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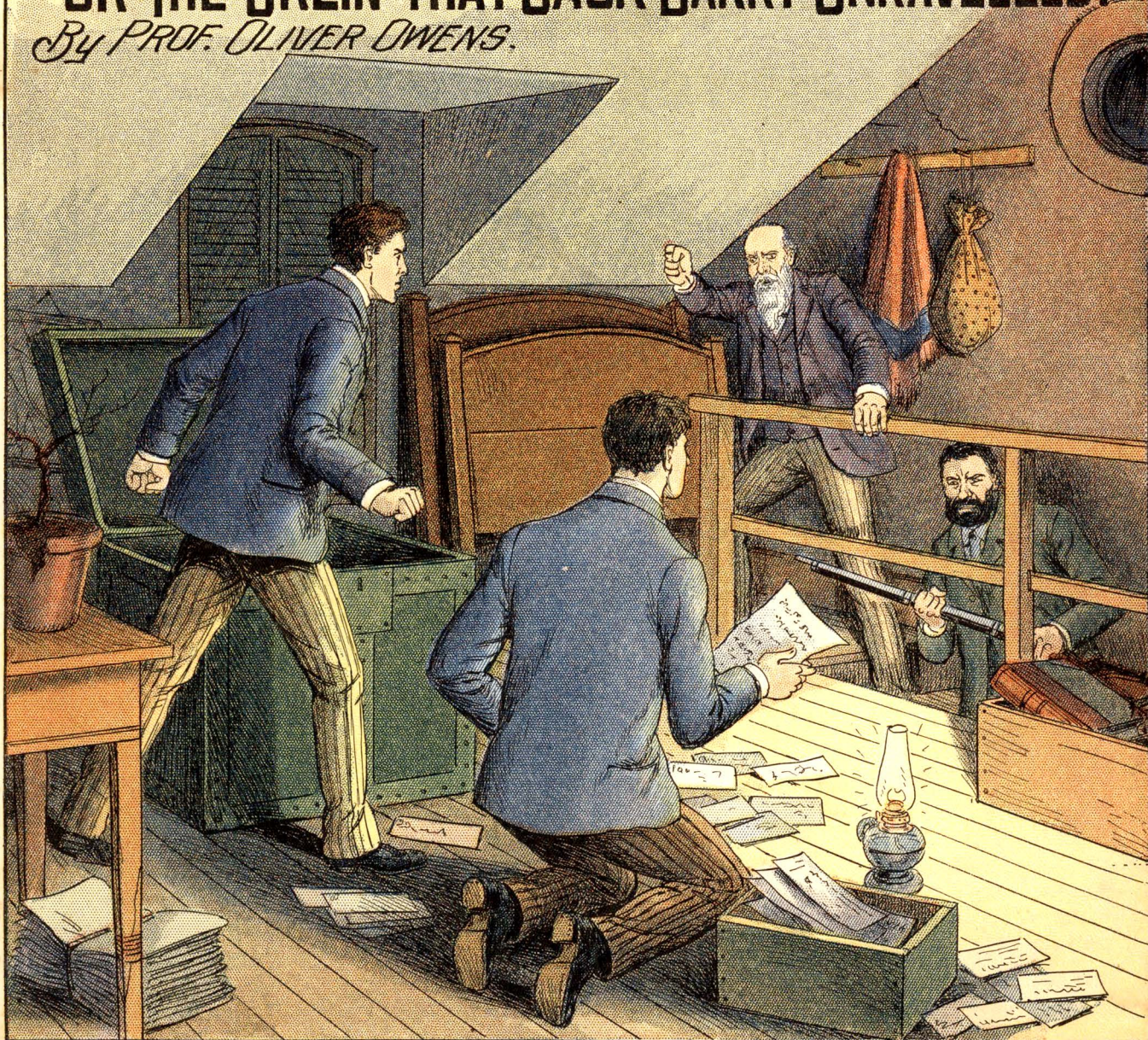
WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY**. EVERY WEEK.

WRITTEN IN CIPHER;

OR THE SKEIN THAT JACK BARRY UNRAVELLED:

By PROF. OLIVER OWENS.



"Look out!" exclaimed Jack. "Some one coming!" Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Then the white-bearded old man appeared. He was followed by a scowling ruffian, armed with a rifle. The boys were caught in the act of examining the papers!

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

A COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK.

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THE SKEIN JACK BARRY UNRAVELLED.

By PROF. OLIVER OWENS.

CHAPTER I.

A LIFE FOR A CENT.

"Jack, I don't believe I'm a coward, but——"

"Of course you're not a coward," the other boy broke in, heartily. "Real cowards are mighty scarce in this world."

"Oh, I don't know about that," argued Tom Eustis.

"Yes, they are. Real cowards are mighty scarce."

"You say that, Jack Barry, because you're so brave that you don't understand the meaning of cowardice."

"I don't know whether I'm brave or not," smiled Jack. "I never had a chance to find out."

"Didn't?" retorted Tom Eustis. "Huh! S'pose you wasn't brave when you got out in the street and stopped the parson's horse and saved his wife from being killed."

"Why, there wasn't anything else to do but jump out and stop the horse," Jack disclaimed. "What would other boys do? See a sickly woman killed by a runaway brute?"

"And it wasn't brave when you jumped off the bridge and brought Hen Spencer's baby out of the river, the time the careless nurse-girl let the kid fall overboard."

"Brave nothing," disdained Jack. "That job only called for a good swimmer, and I suppose I'm that."

"You weren't brave when the yegg men cracked the post-office and the explosion woke up all the men around. There were five of those desperate yegg men, but you routed them out of the store with a shotgun and filled one of 'em up with buckshot."

"That wasn't brave," scoffed Jack. "Look at all the men there were out fighting those safe-breakers. All I did was to get in with the crowd, Tom."

"And you wasn't brave when you——"

"Oh, let up, Tom! You make me feel like a fool!"

"Huh!"

"Fact! So shut up. Get back to case. We were talking about old Zach Gregg."

"That was just what I was going to say, Jack. Sometimes that old fellow gives me the creeps."

"What's wrong about him?"

"I don't know. He's worth a lot of money——"

"That ain't generally reckoned as a crime," smiled Jack.

"But why should a man worth so much money live the way he does?" persisted Tom.

"Why, I suppose a man with a lot of money can live any way he pleases," retorted Jack. "That's one of the nice things about being rich."

"But Zach Gregg lives alone, except for me. He pokes me away off up in an attic, in that big house, and has all the rest of it for himself. He cooks for me and for himself, and has a woman in once in a while to clean house."

"Well, he uses you well enough, as boys' jobs go," suggested Jack Barry, thoughtfully. "He feeds you on enough grub, gives you tolerably good clothes, and sends you to school in season. And he ain't never downright mean with you, is he?"

"No-o-o-o," Tom admitted, thoughtfully. "But I'm half afraid of him most of the time."

"Oh, he seems like a decent enough man," argued Barry, calmly. "He ain't mean, for he lets me come to sleep with you Saturday nights, and always gives me a decent enough breakfast Sunday morning."

"Jack," whispered Tom, mysteriously, as if unwilling to let the matter go, "I can't believe that old Zach Gregg is right in his head."

"Does he show any signs of being lunny?"

"Nothing that I can put my hands on."

"How does he act about me?" Jack asked.

"Why, that's one of the things I can't understand. He seems really interested in you, and talks about you often, old fellow."

"Sure sign he's bug-house," Jack returned, drily.

"Oh, I don't mean that, of course. But there's one thing I want to tell you about. You know the scheme you've been talking about, of trying to work your way out to the Philippine Islands, to see if you can make a better start in life?"

"Of course I remember," Jack replied, brightening up. "I've got a firm notion of doing that in my head. Not that I care about the Philippine Islands. Don't care a hang about them, but I've got a notion that out there a fellow can get a hustle on in short order and heap up money."

"Old Zach Gregg got that out of me this afternoon," went on Tom, excitedly. "What do you suppose he said? It near keeled me over!"

"Well, what did he say?"

"Zach Gregg said you were a mighty bright young fellow, and that it would be a shame for you not to get your best chance for a start in life. He said," Tom went on, as importantly as if he were telling a great state secret, "he said that he had a good mind to look around and see if he couldn't help you to get out to the Philippines. There, now! What do you think of that?"

"And you call him crazy?" Jack demanded, halting and eyeing his chum reproachfully.

"And I half believe he'll find a way for you to get out there," flashed Tom.

"Bully for him! I wish him all success," answered Jack Barry.

"But why should he want to get you out there—so far away?" half argued Tom. "Why should he want you at the other side of the world? Jack, is there some deep, dark plot in it all?"

"Now who's crazy?" laughed Jack. "Why should the old man have to 'plot' to get me out of the way? How can I possibly be in the way?"

"I don't know," Tom admitted, frankly, but puzzled none the less.

"Let's sit down on the wall and think it all over," proposed Jack, halting at the wall that separated Zach Gregg's big grounds from the village street.

It was a night in early summer, and warm. Both boys began to mop their faces.

Jack was an orphan, and had been for the last six years. His father he could just barely remember in the early babyhood days.

Jack's earlier boyhood had been spent at Langville, some two hundred miles from this present home in Belmont.

Six years before, when a boy of eleven, Jack's mother had been killed in a railroad accident.

He had not been with her at the time. She had been away on some business that Jack did not understand, and had been killed close to Belmont.

Jack had not been at the burial, but friends over in Langville had brought him here that he might see the grave.

A handsome, manly little fellow at the age of eleven, Jack had caught the fancy of good old Deacon Spencer, who ran the general store in the village.

Deacon Spencer, learning that Jack was an orphan, had taken our hero in and had been good to him.

The summer before Jack had finished his schooling, and was now working in the deacon's store—for wages and board.

Though he had finished his actual schooling, for the present, at any rate, Jack was far from feeling that he had finished his education.

He owned a microscope—a Christmas present from the deacon—owned also some batteries and other electrical goods, and had a general leaning toward scientific things.

Deacon Spencer was very far from being a rich man, or he would have sent our hero to college.

In fact, the deacon was so poor that he often urged Jack to find some better chance in life than Belmont offered.

Almost from the first, Jack and Tom Eustis had been chums.

Tom was a great, big-hearted fellow, who was much to our hero's liking.

Tom's family lived in Belmont. It consisted of a father, shiftless and often drunk; a patient mother, and brothers and sisters.

A year before Tom had had the chance to go to live as chore-boy with old Zach Gregg.

He had taken the job on the condition that Jack Barry might sleep with him Saturday nights and spend a part of Sunday there.

Much to the surprise of both boys old Zach Gregg had consented willingly enough.

Of Gregg, folks knew only that he had come to Belmont, a childless widower, some fifteen years before.

At first Gregg had worked hard enough for his living.

Then, after five years of toil, he seemed suddenly possessed of enough money to buy a rather fine old place on the main street, a little way out from the village.

Here, on his sixty acres of ground, Zach Gregg led the life almost of a hermit.

He spent little on himself, though he bought much real estate of the kind that could be rented at a good profit.

Zach had one queer, book-filled old room that he called his library, for he had always been a well-read, even if very silent and disagreeable, old man.

"It's nearly half-past ten," said Jack, glancing at his watch, after the two boys had chatted in low tones for a

a few moments. "It's time we were getting into bed. Mr. Gregg may lock us out, anyway, if we're not soon in."

"Lock us out?" echoed Tom. "Huh! He's never abed before twelve or one o'clock, and yet he's always up at six in the morning."

"What does he do?" Jack asked. "Sit and read?"

"Search me," agreed Tom. "I never know what he does late, for I'm always asleep."

Gruff! gruff! came the deep-throated, savage notes of bulldogs' voices as the youngsters neared the fine old house that was going to decay.

"That's one of his bughouse notions," uttered Tom, disgustedly. "Keeps those four savage dogs chained up all day, and won't allow me to get acquainted with 'em. Why, Jack, those dogs would chew me up if they got a chance!"

"They won't get the chance," Jack observed, coolly, as they approached the front entrance.

As they reached the porch the front door swung open, revealing old Zachary Gregg, standing in a dimly lighted hallway.

Gregg was tall, slim, stoop-shouldered. His hair and beard were white as snow. He looked weak, yet in his eyes there was often a fiery flash that made others stand in awe of him.

"Home for the night, eh, boys?" he asked, rather gruffly. "Come in. I want to talk to you, Barry."

"It's about the Philippines," Tom whispered, as they followed the old man down the long hallway.

"Shall I let him know that you've told me something about it?"

"Not a word!" Tom whispered back. "Don't go a word further than he leads you."

They had come now into the sitting-room, where a big lamp burned on the table. Half a dozen books were littered there.

Zach Gregg, dropping into his reading-chair, turned to the boys standing before him.

"I hear, Barry, that you want to go to the Philippines," began the old man.

"Yes, sir," Jack admitted, promptly.

"It's a great place for a boy that can hustle. You want to go there and make your fortune, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hm! I've been reading about those far-away American islands to-night," replied the old man, waving one hand toward the pile of books. "You could do much worse, Barry, than to go there. These books are bound government reports on the Philippines—the kind of books that the government at Washington gives out for nothing. But they tell all about the Philippines and show how fine the chances are."

"I'd like to see some of those books!" cried Jack Barry, eagerly.

"Perhaps you can—to-morrow. But run along to bed now, boys. It's getting late."

Tom disappeared into the kitchen, to come back with the little lamp that he used in his den in the attic.

Jack said "good night," with an unusual attempt to be respectful.

It was quite worth while to stand pat with a rich man who seemed to take an interest in helping him to carry out his ambition.

Both boys were silent as they trod up the stairs to the attic.

It was a big, roomy old place. About one-fourth of the attic had been partitioned off to make this room.

It was about twenty feet square, furnished with an old, four-post bed, a rickety bureau and two chairs that had seen hard times.

There was another great room in the attic that had its own private stairway.

In this great other room neither of the boys had ever been.

It served as a sort of store-room for Mr. Gregg.

Whatever the old man kept there was a mystery.

"Say," quivered Tom, as the two boys undressed, "it looks mighty bright, somehow, for your getting to the Philippines. The old codger has been reading those books on the Philippines all the evening."

"But it don't seem reasonable that he'd spend the money to send me there," argued Jack, eagerly.

"That's one queer thing about old Gregg," Tom observed, sagely. "If he talks much about a thing he winds up by doing it."

"I hope he will in this case," Jack sighed, unbelievably.

"You'd be mighty glad to skip off and leave me behind, wouldn't you?" uttered Tom Eustis, reproachfully.

"Why, Tom, old chap, just the first thing when I got to saving money up I'd send some to bring you out to the Philippines, too."

"Honest, now?" demanded Tom, with sudden interest. "Cross your heart? Hope to die?"

"Hope to die if I wouldn't send for you to join me just as soon as I could," Jack promised, readily enough.

That promise was enough to restore good feeling between the chums.

Tom was soon fast asleep, to dream of the Philippine Islands.

Jack, too, was quickly asleep.

Some time during the night something happened that roused Jack Barry with a start.

He awoke with such a start, in fact, that he sat bolt upright in bed, almost in a cold sweat.

But he laughed off the creepy feeling, lay back on the mattress beside snoring Tom, and prepared to go to sleep.

"What's that?" cried the boy, suddenly starting up again.

He was creepy this time for certain.

For from some vague place in the distance the sharp, far-away murmur of angry voices reached him.

"Where do those voices come from?" Jack wondered, getting up and prowling curiously in his bare feet. "Gracious! Can it be that thieves have gotten into the house, in spite of the dogs? Old man Gregg is rich. Is some one trying to rob him or threaten him out of a pile?"

By this time Jack, hearing the voices again, realized where they came from.

A chimney passed through the room. There was a stove-hole, with a sheet-iron cap over it.

Softly Jack stepped over to the chimney. With the greatest stealth he got the cap out from its place and put one ear close to the hole.

And now a voice travelled up to him that he recognized distinctly as that of Zach Gregg.

That voice was harsh, angry, threatening.

Jack came close to having a cold chill as he recognized the old man's words:

"Curse you! I'll kill you for a cent! I mean that, mind you!"

CHAPTER II.

JACK'S HEAD GETS ON FIRE!

"Gracious!" choked listening Jack. "I've heard about 'holding life cheap,' but that's about the cheapest price I ever heard placed on a life!"

The cold sweat began to stand out in earnest, now, all over the boy's flesh.

His teeth were all but chattering.

It is a grewsome thing to be waked out of a sound sleep in the dead of the night to learn that a murder is being planned in the house.

Not for an instant did he doubt that a murder would be committed.

Zach Gregg had the reputation, in Belmont, of doing anything that he threatened to do.

The voices were still going on in the sitting-room downstairs, but now had fallen so low that Jack could make out nothing, until——

"I see that the only thing I can do is to kill you!"

Jack's hair stood up. Goose-flesh crept all over him.

For an instant he was simply frozen with the horror of this strange business of the night.

Then, in desperation, he stole back to the bedside, vigorously shaking Tom Eustis, and, at the same time holding one firm hand over that sleeper's mouth.

Tom seemed to be awake at last, and trying hard to talk.

"Hush!" whispered Jack, sternly. "Don't dare to talk out loud. Whisper!"

"What's up?" trembled Eustis, as soon as the restraining hand had been taken away from his mouth.

In a few eager, but low, phrases Barry told him.

"Ug-g-gh!" shuddered Tom, beginning to shake.

"If you don't believe me, get up and listen!"

"I—I'll take your w-w-word for it!" faltered Tom.

"Nonsense! Don't be a fool or a coward! Get up and listen. I tell you, Tom, there's murder afloat in this old house!"

Tom got up, though very likely he would have preferred lying abed and hiding his head under the clothes.

There's something mighty unnatural and "creepy" about getting up in a dark, rat-haunted old attic to listen to the sounds of a violent murder!

But Jack firmly marched his chum to the hole in the chimney, signalling by a grip that Eustis should listen.

The sound of angry voices was still there—angry sounds!

"Do right—for Jennie Barry's sake!" a strong voice pleaded below.

"Why should I?" demanded old Gregg's voice. "I disowned her years ago!"

"Then I'll make you!"

"You will?"

Thump! It was the hideous sound of a falling body.

Jack, his head on fire, flew noiselessly to the heavy door of the attic.

In a twinkling he was back at his trembling chum's side.

"Tom," he whispered, in a voice of horror, "the attic door's locked!"

"Glad it is!" chattered Tom.

"You don't mean that," Jack retorted, pityingly. "Tom, we've simply got to stop that murder."

"Too late!" trembled Eustis. "I reckon the whole job has been done."

"Then we've got to bring old Gregg to justice."

"Ouch!"

"What's the matter?"

"Don't talk like that, Jack!"

"Why not, you idiot?"

"Not until it's d-d-daylight, anyway!"

"Bosh! Are you a coward?"

"I d-d-don't know."

"Tom, we've simply got to get out of here and see what dreadful thing has happened, or is happening. Perhaps we can stop a crime yet. It's time for you to stop being a crying little girl!"

"Who's a girl?" flared Tom Eustis, his pride hit in a sore spot.

"Then brace up and be a man—a boy, at least!"

"But what can we do?"

"Get out of here, somehow! You must know the way better than I," Jack urged, firmly.

"If that door is locked, there's a padlock on the outside that'll hold. And we can't break down the door. Even if we did, old Zach Gregg would hear and be up here in a jiffy. Jack," in a tone of horror, "if old Gregg has done one killing just now he'll be ripe for a dozen more if there's any need of it!"

"The window, then," proposed Jack Barry.

Hardly had our hero whispered this than he had stolen away on tip-toe to the one window, which was faintly visible on account of the starlight outside.

The window being open, Jack looked out through this dormer hole in the roof.

"Tom," he whispered, to his chum, who had reached his side, "I'll bet I can crawl out along the edge of the gutter, reach the lightning-rod and let myself down to the ground."

"And drop right into the jaws of four hungry bulldogs that are loose by this time," Tom retorted, unsteadily.

"Whew! That's so. I'd forgotten that."

"That's what would happen. You'd be steak for the dogs!"

Tom had gained a little courage, here by the window, where he could look out at the stars.

He felt reasonably safe, anyway, at having such a cool brave fellow as Jack Barry with him.

"I wonder what has happened down below?" Jack whispered, as they stood just inside from the window.

"Something awful, anyway!" shivered Eustis, the horror coming back in full force.

"What can we do, anyway?" Jack demanded, puzzled.

"Stay here," Tom returned, promptly. "Stay here until morning, and then scoot as fast as our legs will carry us. That is, if old Gregg lets us away from here alive!"

"Tom, you're shaking like a leaf!"

"I know it," confessed the other boy. "I'd give worlds, Jack, if I could be as cool as you are."

"Cool?" sniffed Jack, turning like a flash on the other.

"That shows just how much you know about it. Tom, my head's fairly on fire, and with good reason!"

"Of course!"

"Do you understand, then?"

"Of course! A m-m-m-murder is enough to set any one's head on fire!"

"But it's more than that in this case."

"You heard what was said, Tom?"

"Downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"You heard that stranger's voice appealing to old Gregg to do right for Jennie Barry's sake?"

"Y-y-y-yes; I heard."

"Tom, Jennie Barry was my mother's name!"

"O-o-oh! G-g-great ghosts!"

"Tom, in some way I'm mixed up in this whole thing."

"Jupiter! It looks that way."

"Looks that way?" Jack sniffed, scornfully. "It's a cinch! Whatever can there be between old Zach Gregg and my mother?"

The two boys, white-faced, stared at each other there in the dim starlight by the open window.

"Oh, I've simply got to get down out of here!" groaned Jack, despairingly.

"Two ways of doing it!" clicked Tom. "One is to break down the door and bring up old Gregg and one of the guns he keeps. The other is to shin down outside and drop into the teeth of a few bulldogs. Hear that?"

"That" was the uneasy growling of the loosened dogs below.

"Whew! but it's tough," Jack confessed. "Tom, I really don't know what to do."

"What time is it?"

"Great idea!"

Carefully our hero prowled back until he found his watch. With this he returned to the dormer window.

"Quarter past three," he announced.

"In another hour it'll be daylight."

"That's so."

"Then don't do anything just yet," Tom urged, his heart thumping. "Wait!"

"I suppose we'd better," Jack nodded.

Both felt sore, as if they had been beaten.

Soon they returned to the bed, where they lay with their heads close together, whispering.

"Tom, ever since I heard my mother's name mentioned, I've been so crazy that I can't think straight."

"I don't blame you," Tom admitted. "I'm crazy, too—with the awful horror of this night's business."

"But why should my mother's name be mentioned?"

"Per—perhaps it was some other woman with the same name."

"Forget that!" Jack retorted, decisively. "In the first place, Tom, it seemed like a crazy freak for old Gregg to want to send me out to the Philippines."

"That's so."

"Now he won't do right for Jennie Barry's sake, and he wants me to go to the other side of the world—has been planning for it. He wants to get me out of the way. Tom, it was my mother we heard those two men talking about!"

"It—it looks that way," Tom admitted, quiveringly.

"Now, what interest should Gregg take in my mother?"

"He—Zach Gregg—said he had disowned her," supplied Eustis.

"That's it—that's it!" cried Jack, giving a great start.

He sat bolt upright in bed for a few moments, and now he was trembling for fair—trembling so that he made the bed shake.

"Wh-what ails you?" palpitated Tom, sitting up beside his chum.

"Tom, why did Gregg—why could Gregg—disown my mother? What was she to him?"

"Jupiter!"

"Could old Zach Gregg have been her father?" Jack rambled on, wildly.

"What was your grandfather's name?"

"I never knew," Jack confessed. "All I ever guessed at, from what little my mother said, was that she had displeased her father. Probably by marrying. She never mentioned her father's name to me."

"Then, what if old Zach Gregg is your—?"

Tom could go no further, he was shaking so with the intensity of this new thought.

"It's—it's awful!" Jack confessed. "Tom, if we—if we stir up this murder business downstairs, who knows but I may be sending my own grandfather to the gallows—O-o-oh! Ouch!"

"Better leave it all alone," advised Tom, uneasily.

"Leave it alone?" echoed Barry, wonderingly. "Not much! If any one has done wrong by mother when she was alive, I'll find him out and make him—sweat blood for it! I don't care a hang who he is!"

Jack's head was again on fire. He stepped briskly though softly out of bed and stole to the window to get the cool night air.

But in a twinkling he was back.

"Tom," he whispered, in hoarse command, "get up!"

"Oh, Lord! What is it now?" chattered the other boy.

"Get up!"

"What for?"

"Come to the window—quick!"

Curiosity quickly getting the better of him, even on this ghastly night, Tom Eustis stole tremblingly from his bed, joining our hero at the window.

"See that—over there?" demanded Barry, pointing.

What both boys saw was a light under the trees at the edge of a forest, perhaps half a thousand yards from the house.

To their ears, as they listened, came a faint sound as of pick and shovel.

"Lordy!" groaned Tom. "He's burying the——"

But the poor fellow could go no further.

"Confound those infernal dogs!" muttered Jack, savagely, under his breath.

"Let's get back to bed," urged Eustis. "It ain't right to look on and rubber at such sights."

"Go back to bed, then," advised Barry.

"Not unless you do!"

"Stay here, then—but shut up!"

Jack remained at the window, staring at the light, which remained stationery, as if resting on the ground.

"I've got that spot well fixed," muttered the boy. "I can't forget it in the daylight. Oh, what a fearful, twisted-up skein of wickedness this is! Yes, skein's the right word. But I'll unravel it! I'll get it straight, and see what my mother's name has to do with it!"

Then, after a few minutes:

"Tom," he whispered, "that light is coming back this way!"

"I—I'll take your word for it, Jack. I don't want to look!"

So Jack Barry stole back to the window and watched until he saw the light come toward and reach the house.

More than that, our hero made out the tall, stooped form of Zach Gregg as the bearer of the lantern.

He heard a door close below, and then our horror-sickened, head-burning, dizzied young man stole back to the bed.

"It's a fearful skein that my mother's life and mine seem to be twisted up in," he muttered to himself, again and again, as he lay there. "But I'll unravel it. I'll pick it to pieces, strand by strand, thread by thread, until I've untangled the whole grisly mystery!"

CHAPTER III.

TRACING A FEARFUL DEED.

Strange as it may seem, both boys got some sleep after that.

Tom Eustis managed to snore, in fact, though in a queer, startled way.

As for our hero, his slumber took the distressing form of nightmares, in which he lived the whole thing over again—in which he saw shocking murders committed over and over again, and afterwards watched the bleeding bodies being buried out in the woods under the swaying boughs of great trees.

But at last the sun, shining straight in his eyes, woke Jack Barry up.

For a moment he lay there, rubbing his eyes and shaking with some species of terror.

Then, softly, he got out of bed and tried the door.

"Tom! Tom!" he whispered, an instant later, shaking his chum. "Get up! The door's unlocked!"

Eustis awoke with a tremendous start.

"What's that?"

"The door's unlocked. We can get downstairs now."

Shaking as if with an ague, Eustis got out of bed, hastily and dumbly dressing.

But Jack beat him out at getting dressed.

"Listen, now!" warned our hero. "Keep your nerve straight when you get downstairs. Probably we'll meet old Zach Gregg face to face! Keep cool, Tom. Whatever you do, don't let him see that you've got a line on anything that has happened. Your very life probably depends on your keeping your nerve. Don't shake. Don't act like a girl!"

"Who's afraid?" demanded Tom, gaining new courage, now that he was fully awake in the broad daylight, and especially now that he had cool, dare-devil, resolute Jack Barry at his side.

"I'm glad you ain't afraid," Jack retorted, grimly. "Come downstairs, then."

Jack went down the stairs as if he were glad to get away from the attic. Tom followed as a matter of dreadful course.

They passed into the dining-room.

There, on the bare floor, the first sight that caught Barry's eyes was the presence of a great, dark stain.

More than that, it was plain that the floor, at just that spot, had been hard and persistently scoured as if to remove the stain.

"Blood stains can't be washed out. I've always heard that," thrilled Jack. "It's a good thing they can't, too."

Tom, catching sight of the same grisly sight, and understanding it, tip-toed outdoors, sick at his stomach.

Jack quickly followed.

There in the yard, strolling slowly about, head bent towards the ground, was the old man of this house of horror.

He looked up, sharply, keenly, as he heard the steps of the youngsters.

"Morning, boys. How'd you sleep?" was Gregg's gruff greeting.

But there was a tone of keen interest under it all.

"Never slept better in my life, sir," Jack lied, bravely.

"Didn't wake up once all night, eh?" persisted the old man.

"Not once, sir," came from Jack, while Tom looked away, afraid to trust to his voice.

"Boys can sleep that way. I wish I could!" sighed the old man. "Well, it's pretty near time for breakfast. Get washed up, and I'll have something on the table."

"Why, I forgot to say something last night," Jack broke in.

"What's that, Barry?"

"Why, sir, the deacon's wife invited us both over to her house for breakfast this morning, and Tom and I, sir, kinder thought maybe we'd like to go, for a change—if you wouldn't think us rude, Mr. Gregg."

But the old man seemed greatly relieved.

"Go, by all means," he agreed. "I suppose Deacon Spencer's wife is a great cook."

"Mighty good, sir," Jack agreed. "And there's one thing more, Mr. Gregg."

"Out with it, then, Barry!"

"Tom and I were wondering if you'd mind, sir, if he slept with me at the store to-night. I've been telling Tom about my experiments with electric things, and Tom thought he'd like to have an evening with me, and watch what I'm doing. So, can Tom stay with me to-day, sir, and to-night?"

"That'll be all right, I guess," nodded the old man, gruffly. "I can attend to the few chores here to-day, I guess."

"Oh, can Tom go at once, sir?"

"Yes; run along."

Not a whit of urging did either boy need.

"Say," blurted Tom, honestly, as they hurried up the street, "you're a wonder at lying!"

"Well, you're satisfied to put in the day away from Zach Gregg, ain't you?" Jack queried.

"Satisfied!" gasped Eustis.

The breakfast at Mrs. Spencer's had, of course, been a pure invention.

But Jack let his chum into Deacon Spencer's store.

There, from the well-stocked grocery shelves, and with the aid of an oil-stove, Barry provided all the breakfast that hungry youngsters could demand.

There, safe behind the shuttered doors, they could eat with relish, too, for, whatever else happens, boyhood is hungry!

And there, through the day, the boys talked with growing courage and coolness.

Around Jack's usually mild mouth, firm, grim lines were settling.

"I understand, old fellow, or at least have a sneaking suspicion, of why old Gregg was willing to interest himself in my getting to the Philippine Islands," Jack explained.

"And I s'pose you wouldn't go on his help, now?" Tom propounded.

"I wouldn't go on any one's help," Jack retorted, promptly. "A million dollars wouldn't tempt me to quit Belmont until I've unravelled this tangled skein that has my mother's name twisted up in the threads."

"Let's go to one of the constables," proposed Tom.

"What for?"

"Tell him what we know."

"Now, don't get foolish," Perry begged, impatiently.

"But the constable would go out to that—that place in the woods, and dig up the—the——"

"The corpse?" flashed Jack.

"Ugh! Don't talk about it as plainly as that. It gives me the shivers even yet."

"The constable would find something," Jack admitted.

"He'd probably arrest Zach Gregg, too. But how would that help?"

"Help what?"

"How would it help me to find out the very things I want to know?" Jack demanded.

"Blessed if I know," Tom confessed.

"Now, that's just the point," Jack went on. "I don't intend to have any officers butting in and spoiling the whole thing, until I've first had my chance to get at the bottom of this queer business."

"Then, what'll you do?" Tom demanded, open-mouthed.

"To-night, you and I will go out to the woods——"

"Don't say that!"

"And dig up the body," Jack went on, firmly.

Tom stared, with a look of more than terror in his eyes.

"Oh, if you're afraid," Barry went on, spiritedly, "I'll look around and see if I can find some spunky girl to go with me, instead."

"I—I'll go," Tom promised, with almost unlooked-for valor.

"Good! Then that's settled. You see, Tom, I've got a strong notion that I want to see just who the murdered man was before I go to the constables with any tales. I want to know what this whole business means, from every side, before I take a chance on any false steps. Now, let's go out for a walk and get our nerve back in the open sunlight."

In one way and another they killed the time that warm, summer Sunday.

Their meals they got in the store, Jack proving himself a wonderful cook, with canned goods, crackers, cheese, fruit and bottled "pop" to draw upon from the stock of the store.

And so night came on. Through the early evening the boys sat out front on the steps of the store porch.

But shortly after ten o'clock that night they stole away, from the back of the store and across fields.

Each had a trowel in his pocket.

But Jack, in addition, carried a good, strong shovel and a pocket electric lamp, borrowed out of the stock of the store.

As for Eustis, he skulked along with a loaded double-barrelled shotgun, which he carried "to look out for dogs," as he rather huskily explained.

Nor did they meet any one as they covered the ground between their starting place and the woods in which they had seen the light the night before.

All Belmont seemed asleep this summer Sunday night.

"It's a bit early, when we think how late old Gregg sits up," protested Tom.

"This hour is just as good as any other," Jack retorted.

"We can keep our eyes peeled in the woods, and from there we can see whether his light is going at the house."

"It—it ain't altogether the living that I mind," Tom admitted, uneasily.

"Look here, you ain't going to talk any ghost nonsense, are you?" Jack demanded, disgustedly.

"Of course not."

"'Cause if you are, I'll take you back to the store and leave you."

"I'm a-going through," Tom Eustis asserted, with all the boldness he could muster. "When a fellow has as much nerve as you've got, Jack, his partner has to be of the same stuff."

"That's all right, then," Jack Barry nodded.

Yet it must be admitted that both youngsters felt a bit "queerish" as they neared the spot where they had seen the lantern the night before.

As nearly as Jack could judge, the exact place where he had seen the light lay between two great old elms that they now were nearing.

"Gregg's light is going all right in his sitting-room," whispered Jack, as they gazed across the field and orchard at the run-down, big, old house.

"I hope he's there."

"Of course he's there. You don't suppose he'd be strolling out here again for his health, do you?"

Jack, taking off his straw hat, got down on his knees close to the ground.

"What you going to do?" Tom whispered.

"Look for the place, of course. You watch around here while I do the hunting."

Tom took an extra-brave grip on the gun while our hero, shading the pocket electric light behind his hat, began to go carefully over the ground.

"I've got it!" quivered the young searcher at last.

"Sure?" Tom whispered, a trifle shakingly.

"Sure enough! Look here! You can see where the sod's been cut and then tamped down again. See! The line is almost clearly marked. You can see how it runs."

"Just six foot by two!" gasped Tom Eustis.

CHAPTER IV.

WRITTEN IN CIPHER

Chug!

That low, almost smothered, sound was made by Jack Barry's trowel striking in to raise the first sod.

These sods being loose, he pried them up with surprising speed.

There below the earth showed how freshly it had been tampered with.

"It can't take us long!" thrilled the young investigator.

"That's one comfort," Tom confessed. "But when we get down there, o-o-oh——"

Tom broke off, but valiantly took another tight grip on

gunstock and barrel, as if he relied upon that weapon to fend off all danger from both worlds.

But as for Jack, he worked on with feverish haste, and soon, growing in confidence and boldness, he seized the larger shovel and began to work cautiously with that.

Glancing around, he saw Tom's fascinated gaze.

"Better creep closer to the edge of the woods and watch sharp with the gun," whispered Barry.

Tom, glad of any excuse to get away from that rapidly deepening hole, stole a few yards away.

But Jack worked on with an energy that knew no time for fear.

He was simply consumed by a wild desire to get quickly to the bottom of a mystery that tormented him as no fear could do.

Three feet down now!

Chug! The point of his shovel struck against something solid and woodeny.

"That's it!" he thrilled, and worked with more feverish haste than before.

He did not call out to Eustis, but worked all around the lid of a box that had come into view, until he had it all bared.

Then he whistled softly.

"What is it?" hailed whispering Eustis.

"Come here!"

Tom came, though with anything but an eager step.

"See that box?" Jack demanded, pointing down into the hole.

"Oh, Lordy!"

"It ain't nothing to run from!"

"Who's running?" Tom scowled, fiercely.

"There ain't anybody in that box," Jack declared, with an air of conviction.

"What's that you're saying?"

"There ain't anybody there. It's something else. That box ain't over four feet long. Help me get it out."

Tom obeyed with as much pluck as he could summon.

Soon they had the box out.

"Again, no body," Jack declared. "This box is so light that I could carry it alone."

"Then what on earth can be in it?" Eustis demanded.

"We'll know after a while."

"Going to open it?"

"Of course, but not here."

"Where?"

"At the store, where there'll be no danger of any one looking on."

"Going to carry it there?"

"Of course!"

"But s'pose there should be a—a body in it?" insisted Tom, showing pale once more.

"Rot and rot! It's something very different from any one's remains, I tell you. Stand by, now, and watch out, while I fill the dirt in."

This Jack did as best he could, using all his skill, before he replaced the sods, to hide the fact that the hiding place of the box had been tampered with.

"Now, then!" he called, sharply.

With their other things to carry, it was somewhat awkward to manage the box between them.

Yet they contrived it, nor did their extra burden prove very heavy.

In time they got to the back of the store.

Jack's ready key admitted them.

First, making sure that the shutters were all in place, Jack lighted one of the lamps.

"Now we'll have a look at the thing," proposed Tom, as brave as a soldier, now that he knew he had not been on a body-snatching jaunt.

"But there's one thing puzzling me," admitted Jack, as he sat on a counter eyeing the box.

"There's more than one thing puzzling me," retorted the Eustis boy.

"Tom, there certainly was some one killed there at Gregg's house last night."

"Why, it seemed like it, Jack."

"And remember that big blood stain on the floor."

"And it's sure that old Zach had tried hard to scrub the stain out."

"Then, where's the body?" propounded Barry, plumply.

"Search me," returned Tom, trying to grin. "I'm mighty sure I haven't got it."

"But we've simply got to find that dead body. Don't you see that, Tom?"

"No, sir, I don't see it, can't see it—and won't see it! We've looked hard and haven't found it, and that ends it. I'm no rubber-neck," protested Eustis, with the air of one who has taken an honest stand.

"Well, we'll see what's in here," proposed Jack, surveying the box more closely than he had done before. "But there's one thing I see right now, Tom."

"What's that?"

"This is an old box. It has been in the ground a long time."

"Then it wasn't put there last night," advanced the other boy.

"You can't be too sure of that. I mean, we can't be sure that the box wasn't dug down to and opened. In fact, I'm sure it was."

"Then, what?"

"I'll tell you soon," promised Barry.

Vaulting the counter, he was soon back.

The lid of this old, damp, earth-smelling box was fastened down by a padlock and hasp.

As the hasp was screwed to the box, Jack began to remove the screws.

They came slowly, showing how long they had been imbedded in the damp wood.

Tom stood by, looking on with an interest that was now untinged by any sort of dread.

"Help me off with the lid," Jack directed, crisply.

They laid the cleated top boards aside, and, as they did so, Jack gave a little cry of surprise.

For all that first appeared was a tightly packed mass of a woman's wearing apparel.

This, as our hero began to lift it out, proved to be as old and damp as the box.

Yet the texture of the ancient garments that he spread out and held up proved to be fine.

There were laces, too, on these garments.

"I wonder if these clothes were once worn by my mother?" Jack uttered, reverentially.

"Maybe," Tom assented.

Something rattled on the floor as the searcher lifted out another garment.

It was something round and shiny—a circular disk of tin, about a foot in diameter, it proved to be, as our hero pounced upon it and held it up.

"Tom, this was put in last night!" breathed the boy.

"Why?"

"See how new and shiny it is. This has never been buried for years, like the other stuff. And—oh, gracious!"

"What's up?" Eustis asked, moving close to his friend, who now stood under the lamp, examining the disk.

One side bore a queerly scrawled legend, etched in, as if with an acid.

"What is it—a puzzle?" throbbed Tom.

"Yes, a puzzle, indeed!" thrilled Jack Barry. "It's a cipher!"

"A cipher? Do you mean a nought?—a zero?"

"No, sir; just what I said—a cipher."

"What's that?"

"Why, a cipher," Jack went on, eagerly, "is a secret style of writing. People use a cipher alphabet when they want to write down something that they mustn't forget and they don't want other people to read."

"And what does this cipher say?"

"Why, if I knew that," Jack exclaimed, in exasperation, "I'd be almost as wise as you are foolish!"

"Then what good does it do us to have this tin shingle?"

"I'll find out what this cipher means! I'll decipher it!" breathed Jack, fiercely. "It's all a part of the big skein that I've set out to unravel. Tom, before this time to-morrow night I'll know just what this message means!"

"Then you won't get any sleep to-night, old chap."

"Sleep? I don't care whether I do or not. But wait."

Jack laid the tin disk on the store counter, then once more bent over the box.

"Hurrah!" he quivered, in a moment.

For now, from among the bottommost garments in the box he had lifted up a steel box.

It was not more than a foot long, nor much more than four inches square at the ends, but for its size it was amazingly heavy.

"Money!" breathed Tom. "That must be the way old Zach keeps his hoards."

"Nonsense," vibrated business-like Jack. "It's out-of-date for misers to bury money in the woods. They trust the banks nowadays. But this little old box must hold something of interest."

"How are you going to open it?" Eustis questioned, as he caught sight of the lock on the front of the box.

"With a can-opener, of course!" Barry retorted, disgustedly.

"Yes, you are!"

"Oh, we'll find a way to get it open to-morrow," Jack promised. "We have this stuff here now and we can take our time about finding out what it all means, and what this box holds."

"Have we got to wait until to-morrow?" quivered impatient Tom.

"It looks that way."

"What'll we do to kill the time until then?"

"We might sleep, if we've nothing else to do," Jack hinted, drily.

"You're going to hide this truck for to-night, then?"

"Of course; we can find a bully good place down in the cellar, among all the old packing cases. But, first, let's have a good look at this queer old cipher message."

Jack held the tin disk up to the light, regarding it through half-closed eyes.

"There's something mighty important hidden here," he muttered, agog with curiosity.

"What is it?" Tom asked. "Greek?"

"No, you ninny. Some queer kind of an alphabet that the writer invented for the purpose of keeping his information from reaching other folks."

"He did his job well," Tom sighed. "We can never read that stuff."

This was the queer-looking cipher message at which both boys stared:

0@034\$ 59 ?9;0*353 8%3:58^8?@589: ^9745= ^49;
^*994 8: @558?. "9**\$?@: ?9;0*353 5=3 ?*73
3@\$8*6 8: ?@\$3 9^ :33%.

"Now, what on earth can any human being make of that rubbish?" sighed Tom.

"We'll read it to-morrow, and even you will admit the straightness of the reading," Jack retorted, vimfully. "For now, help me to get this big box downstairs."

The job of hiding their night's find accomplished at last, the two youngsters retired to such rest as they could get.

Tom Eustis soon was snoring, but as for Jack, his dreams were many and queer.

CHAPTER V.

THE CODE OF THE DEVIL.

"Oh, Dot!"

Jack Barry, to all seeming, just loafing on the porch of the store the next morning, called to a girl who was passing on the further side of the street.

Then, as she halted, Jack went bounding across the street to meet her.

From all appearances, Dorothy Crothers was a girl well worth running to meet.

She was a year younger than Jack—that is to say, just sixteen.

Rather tall, slender, though rounded, with an olive-tinted, comely face and dark, sparkling eyes, she looked, in her thin, summery gown and fragile white hat, as pretty a girl as one could find in a day's march.

As the two looked swiftly into each other's eyes it was plain that they understood each other very well.

They were sweethearts, in fact, and had been for the last year.

Dot's father was the village blacksmith.

"There's something unusual up," guessed the girl, as Jack reached her side.

"What makes you say that, Dot?"

"The look in your eyes."

"I can't see it."

"Of course you can't, you goose!" Dot laughed. "You can't look into your own eyes without a mirror. But what's up, Jack?"

"Oh, just—just—a queer old scheme that Tom and I are working out. We want your help, Dot."

"What on earth can you want me to do?"

"Dot, can you slip into your father's shop and get us two cold chisels—one medium-sized and one small?"

"Why can't you walk up with me and get 'em yourself?"

"I could if your father doesn't see me take 'em."

"What's that?" Dot demanded, a trifle sharply. "Don't you want him to know that you've got the cold chisels?"

"N-not to-day."

"Why not, Jack?" Dot demanded, rather hastily.

"Oh, it's a secret."

"Oh, have secrets from me, if you want!" pouted Dot.

"It ain't that, Dot," the boy hurriedly explained. "But it's—well, a sort of little surprise, that's all."

"Then, why can't I know about it?"

"You can, in a day or two, Dot. But please don't ask me any more just now—please."

"Oh, well, then," murmured the girl, thinking to herself how fine and manly Jack looked just at that moment, "I'll get you the chisels, and keep mum, if you don't want them to break into somebody's safe."

"Dot!" Barry exclaimed, in a hurt voice.

"Oh, of course, I know it's all right, Jack. But I don't see why you can't tell me."

She looked so curious and so teasing that it was hard to resist her.

But just then, by a happy inspiration, Jack realized how he could put her off with a white lie.

"Dot, you make a fellow tell so much! Now, this secret is something that I want to surprise you with bye and bye."

"Oh, why didn't you say so at first? Can't I have even a little hint? No? Well, come on, then—but you're awfully mean."

Jack and Dot strolled slowly up the street, talking together.

"Come into the shop with me," whispered Dot. "Get your eye on the chisels you want, then pick 'em up when

Dad isn't looking. But you're not going to do anything wrong with the chisels, Jack?"

"Have I got to assure you of that again?" he demanded, reproachfully.

"Oh, you silly boy—to think that I meant it!"

They strolled into the blacksmith shop.

Mr. Crothers, who was working there alone, looked up long enough to greet them, then went on repairing a wagon tire.

Jack looked slyly around until his eye lighted on a little heap of cold chisels.

There were so many there that a couple surely would not be missed.

"Come out and look at this horse, neighbor!" called a man who had driven up to the door of the shop.

Mr. Crothers went.

In a twinkling, Jack Barry had swooped down upon the pair of chisels that he wanted, stowed them swiftly away in a pocket.

"I've got 'em," he confided to Dot.

"And now you're going, eh, Jack? That's right! •Run off as soon as you've got no further need of me."

"You know better," Jack declared. But this is important."

"Well, I don't mind if it's a nice surprise coming for me."

But Dot's eyes danced unbelievably.

Jack hurried back to the store.

Deacon Spencer, a kind-faced old man, slim and bent, was inside, waiting on a couple of customers.

Tom was there, too, sitting on a packing case.

"Can you spare me a little while, Deacon?" Jack asked.

"Yes, I guess so," assented the old man.

A signal to Tom, and the two boys disappeared down into the cellar.

There they lighted a lantern, then went rummaging among the piles of old barrels and packing boxes.

They found their own hidden box in short time, and got the little steel box.

"Now, I guess we'll soon crack this," Jack declared.

He placed the edge of the heavier chisel against the lock on the steel box.

Tap! tap! Thump! It took some minutes of pounding, but at last the lock snapped off.

His heart beating fast, Jack pried up the lid, looked inside.

A single paper rewarded his search. He unfolded it with trembling hands.

"A marriage certificate," Jack whispered, as he read.

"Jennie Crossleigh to Richard Gregg. That's all."

"Not much of a find," grunted Tom.

"Yet it was important enough for old man Gregg to want to hide. But, great Scott! Could my mother's maiden name have been Crossleigh? And did Gregg have a son or brother named Richard? But, no, my mother didn't marry a Gregg. She married my father, William T. Barry. Yet what can this whole thing mean?"

Jack thought and thought, but the more he did so the more puzzled he became.

"We'll figure out, bye and bye, what this marriage certificate means, but, first, Tom we've got to get at the meaning of the cipher."

"Easy said, but hard to do," clicked Eustis.

"Oh, now you keep quiet a while, and we'll see about that," Jack proposed, as he brought the tin disk once more to light.

Squatting on the cellar floor, close to the lantern, he rested the disk across his knees, then drew out paper and pencil.

"Wish you joy," yawned Eustis.

"Shut up, can't you, old fellow?"

Tom subsided, and Jack busied himself with making many copyings from the disk.

For half an hour our hero did not speak. Then he looked up to say:

"I believe it's coming, Tom, old boy!"

"What does it say, then?" Eustis demanded, eagerly.

"Oh, of course, I can't say that yet. But see here. Look at this piece of tin with me and do some thinking. Now, what's the letter in the alphabet that is most often used?"

"Blessed if I know."

"Well, it's the letter 'e.' Now see here, there's one character that appears ten times. That's '3.' That looks 'e,' too, turned the other way. Now in this cipher alphabet '3' must stand for 'e.' Now 'the' is a very common word of three letters that ends in 'e.' Here we find such a word, written '5=3.' Suppose that stands for 'the.' Then we already know three letters in this cipher alphabet. Here's a word of two letters that begins with a '5.' That must be 'to.' If it is, then we know that '9' stands for 'o.' So we have another letter. Now here's a word of seven letters, written '?9;0#353.' Here we know or guess that the last three letters are 'ete.' There's also a '9' in the word, just where it would be in 'complete.' So let's call that word 'complete,' as it undoubtedly is, and just see how many new letters of the cipher alphabet we have."

Jack's eyes were dancing with the excitement of his search.

Tom Eustis looked wonderingly on, trying to grasp it all.

Such letters as he had already solved Jack fitted into the other cipher words where they occurred.

Now and then he shook his head. The new letters guessed at did not seem to fit, and he was forced to try over again.

Yet, as he progressed in reading the cipher, he became more and more feverishly absorbed.

"It'll all come straight in another half hour, Tom!" he quivered. "Look at how far I've got already."

And, indeed, in another half hour he looked up with a stifled cry of joyous success.

"I've got it!" he thrilled. "I knew I'd do it. Look here, Tom, here's the cipher alphabet, as far as it has been used in this message."

On a sheet of paper Jack Barry showed figures and letters, grouped.

The figure, or mark, appeared first, in each pair, and

after it stood the letter of the alphabet that it represented.

Here was the alphabet, as far as Jack Barry had been able to go:

Op @a 3e 4r \$s 5t ?c 9o ;m #l 8i %d 'n^f 7u =h "b
*g 6y.

"Can you read the message, then?" Tom asked, as he gazed over this queer-looking lay-out.

"The whole of it!" Jack throbbed.

"What does the message say, then?"

"That's the puzzling part," Jack confessed, with a sigh of disappointment. "I can't make much out of it yet. Here's the message, though, as I've translated it from the cipher."

And Jack read from his notes:

"Papers to complete identification fourth from floor in attic. Boggs can complete the clue easily in case of need."

"That's no clearer. What on earth can it all mean."

"Why, first of all, old fellow, there are some papers in Gregg's attic——"

"In his store-room? His strong-room?"

"Exactly."

"But we can't get in there."

"We can, and will," Jack snapped. "Now when we get in there, we've got to be able to figure out what 'fourth from floor' means. When we get the papers we've got to try, in some way, to find this fellow whose name is Boggs. Then we'll be a long way on our road, won't we, Tom?"

"Yes; when we've done all these things!" Tom retorted, with mingled scorn and unbelief.

"That's the tangle we've got to sort out," Jack went on, his cheeks blazing and his eyes glowing. "It mightn't seem worth while, but my mother's name is mixed up in it, and we know that it was worth while to commit a murder about."

"If a murder was committed at all," Tom hinted, slowly.

"Yes, that's so, too."

"It's a mixed-up old affair!"

"It's a tangled skein that we're going to unravel, Tom Eustis."

"But how?"

"First of all, by getting into Gregg's strong store-room."

"How?"

"Tom, we can make use of these chisels."

"But how are we going to get the chance?"

"If nothing wrong happens, old fellow, I can go over to sleep with you next Saturday night. Then we'll get into that room. Between then and Sunday morning we'll know all that's to be known."

"Or be caught and killed by old Gregg!" trembled Tom.

After first carefully hiding their secret again, and the chisels, too, the youngsters returned to the store above.

"It's the kind of a tangled skein I like, especially when my dead mother's name is mixed up in it," Jack repeated over and over again.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE TEETH OF THE TRAP!

"Here we are!"

"Lord, I wish we were out of it!"

Jack's whispering voice had an exultant note in it.

But Tom's scared voice shook and quivered.

Saturday night had come around once more.

Through the week the boys had managed to live, somehow, without exploding on account of their overwhelming curiosity.

Zach Gregg had been much as usual.

Tom had lived at the house in fear and trembling all the week, but no harm had come to him. No questions had been asked of him.

Apparently the old man was wholly free from suspicion that the boys were meddling in his affairs.

On this Saturday night the old man had greeted our hero pleasantly enough, and had again asked him about his ambition to go to the Philippines.

Later on the boys had gone up to bed, in Tom's attic, next to the mysterious store-room.

Then, late in the night, using their chisels cautiously, they had pried off enough boards to enable them to step straight into the store-room.

And here they were, Jack holding the lamp high above his head as he peered about in the musty old place.

"'Fourth from the floor,'" he repeated, over and over again.

Then he gave a sudden start.

"That must be it, Tom," he throbbed. "It's the only thing here that appears to be 'fourth from floor.' Look for yourself."

Jack Barry was pointing straight at a heap of trunks and boxes, four in number, that stood piled up against one wall.

"There's four of 'em," Tom confessed, "and no mistake."

"Then down comes that trunk! Get hold of the other end. Easy now! It may be heavy."

Thrilling, as if they feared being caught at house-breaking, the two young prowlers got the trunk to the floor without making any particular noise.

It was locked, this trunk, but a few vigorous prods with one of the chisels scattered the parts of the fastening.

"Hold the light, Tom," Barry thrilled, as he bent over the trunk.

Tom did as directed, while Jack delved eagerly into the contents of the trunk, which was only about one-third full.

"Seems to be all legal papers," Jack announced, in his eager whisper. "We can't cart 'em all away, so I suppose we'll have to look 'em through here. Put the lamp on the floor, and I'll sit down and go through the whole lot."

With a dozen legal-looking papers in his lap, our hero began to read.

"A mortgage," he checked off. "And another mortgage. A 'conveyance.' A deed. Why, these are all old Gregg's

legal papers straight enough, and nothing to give a ghost of a clew to anything."

"What we're looking for will be there somewhere," soothed Tom. "Get another armful, and have another look."

Jack rose, standing over the trunk.

Tom, on his knees, turned to watch.

Both were absorbed in their work, but Jack's keen ears were still on duty.

"Look out!" Jack exclaimed, suddenly, in a whisper. "Some one coming!"

Footsteps, stealthy though they were, sounded on the stairs.

Then the white-bearded old man appeared.

He was followed by a scowling ruffian, armed with a rifle.

The boys were caught in the act of examining the papers!

"Thought I heard some one coming," Jack tried to say boldly and pleasantly.

But the words froze on his lips under the savage glare that Zach Gregg gave them.

"Thieves, eh?" snarled the old man.

"Why, no, sir!" Jack protested. "We were rummaging here for a lark."

Tom Eustis appeared too stricken with terror to say anything.

"Don't let 'em get away!" Gregg warned the rascal with him.

"They won't get far!" growled the man, holding the rifle so that he could turn it on either one of them.

There he remained on the stairs, with the rifle's muzzle thrust in under the railing, ready to shoot at need.

But Zach Gregg, quite unafraid of two juvenile burglars, finishing climbing the stairs and stood between them.

"Well," he demanded, harshly, "what did you expect to find here?"

"Captain Kidd's treasure," joshed Jack.

Zach's face blackened with a diabolical scowl.

"Don't try to get fresh with me, boy! Tell the truth and the whole of it. Why did you break into this room, and why are you going through my private papers?"

"I've told you, sir, that we did it just for a lark," Jack lied, desperately. "We were curious, and so we came in to nose around. I suppose any other boys would be as curious about a mysterious room."

"Queer kind of curiosity," snarled the old man. "There's another name for this kind of work. Know what it is?"

"What is it, sir?" came from Jack, for Tom was still far too scared to mutter a single word.

"Legal word," hinted Gregg.

"What is it, sir?"

"Burglary!"

How Gregg's eyes gleamed as he uttered the threatening word.

Then he laughed harshly as he saw the pallor creep into our hero's cheeks.

But Jack, after the first moment of daze, proved equal to the occasion.

"The law has a whole lot of funny words to explain what people do," he jeered.

"Well?" sneered Gregg.

"Last Saturday night, for instance, Mr. Gregg."

"Well, what then?"

Jack stepped close to the old man before he whispered:

"Might as well be careful, Mr. Gregg. Tom and I know all about that visitor last Saturday night. You know, the one whom you said you'd kill for a cent. We heard all that!"

If our hero expected to see Gregg weaken he was mistaken.

Instead, the old man threw both arms around the boy.

As in a vise, he held the boy and searched his pockets.

Then, flashingly, he held up a thick roll of bank-notes.

"So! You've been robbing my chest of the money that was hidden away there? That's what you were here for!"

Jack, released, reeled back, staring at Gregg in amazement.

"You put that money in my pocket yourself and took it out again," blurted the boy.

"Did, eh?" jeered the old man.

"Yes; and it's a chestnutty, mean, low-down trick that won't fool anybody."

"We'll see about that," sneered Zach Gregg. "This money was in the chest, and you took it out. You meant to steal it. That's why you burglarized this room. See if any sane person won't believe that?"

"You don't mean——" Jack began, quiveringly.

"Get downstairs with you! Both of you! March!"

The man with the gun went down ahead of them, waiting at the floor below.

Zach Gregg brought up the rear, with the two boys between him.

They went along, quietly enough, for the simple reason that there was no chance to resist.

"Burglary, and stealing my money!" stormed the old man, as he forced his two youthful victims into his sitting-room, while the rascal with the gun mounted guard alertly.

"What's the use of saying that, Mr. Gregg, when you know it ain't true?" Jack Barry blazed, indignantly. "What do you mean to do to us?"

"What do I mean to do?" echoed the old man, with a gasp of amazement. "Why, I'm going to do just what any other man would do who finds burglars in his house. I'm going to send you off to jail. Rot there, too, confound you, you young prowling sneaks!"

"Won't you listen to reason, sir?" urged Jack.

"Yes, I'll listen to any real reason that you can give for being there in my store-room," retorted the old man, his eyes glaring like those of a wild beast at bay.

"But I've already told you, sir, that we went in there just out of plain curiosity."

"And I tell you that you lie, Jack Barry!" thundered the old man. "That yarn might do for some boys, but you're a boy of too much brains, Jack Barry. You had some stronger reason, and you're hiding it from me. But I can send you behind the bars to stay, and that's enough

for me. To jail you go. Watch 'em, Boggs, and see that they don't get away. I'm going for a constable."

Boggs!

The man who could supply missing clues in this tangled skein in which there was not yet as much as one straight clew!

Jack heard the name, and fairly trembled.

Here before him stood the man who knew all that our hero burned to know.

Here the man, and he standing guard until an officer could come and put an end to all the activity that Jack Barry had planned!

What, then, was to become of the skein and its unravelling?

Jack felt his knees giving way beneath him.

"Mr. Gregg, won't you listen——" he faltered, desperately.

Bang! It was the door closing after the departing old man.

Jack raced toward the door.

"Come back, or I'll blow your head off!"

It was Boggs, levelling the rifle full at our hero's head.

In the scoundrel's small, snapping black eyes was a glint that showed with how much relish he would pull the trigger.

Truly, Boggs did not look like the kind of man from whom to force information freely.

Jack, with a sigh of utter helplessness, turned.

"Come back here!" ordered Boggs.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid——" began Jack.

"I ain't," grinned Boggs.

"I don't want to get away."

"So I've been noticing."

"Can't you be decent, Mr. Boggs? Or do you feel that you have to be as nasty and unreasonable as Gregg himself?"

"Calling the old man names, are you?"

"Well, he's sure unreasonable."

"That's his business," retorted Boggs, grimly.

"But what do you mean to do with us?"

"Kill you, if you try to get away before the old man comes back!"

"Bosh! You wouldn't dare to shoot boys!"

"Try me!" dared Boggs. "I'll follow orders from Gregg. He always stands by a fellow, and pays well for what he wants done."

So Boggs was the utter and willing tool of the old man, held in leash by money?

"It'd be a mighty hard job getting anything out of Boggs!" quavered Jack Barry, his heart sinking.

Tom Eustis had sunk, tremblingly, upon a chair, where he sat motionless, the picture of misery.

"Won't you let us go?" pleaded Jack.

"Nary go!" grinned Boggs. "That is, not until you go to jail."

"You don't mean it—can't mean it!" screamed Jack.

Then Boggs laughed a gruff, evil laugh.

For Jack Barry, abandoning himself to his anguish, threw himself on the floor, rolling over and over as he sobbed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOYS WHO TURNED BATS.

"What good'll that do you?" leered Boggs, unfeelingly, as he watched the unhappy boy.

Then the watcher turned to leer at Tom Eustis, drawn up in a heap of misery on the chair.

But that instant's glance proved the undoing of the watcher.

For Jack, who had been rolling nearer and nearer as he sobbed, suddenly saw the chance for which he was waiting.

Like a flash, Jack Barry was up, his head diving in between the man's legs.

Up rose Jack, like a flash, bearing the other on his shoulders.

In a twinkling Boggs slipped and fell, landing rather heavily on his head.

"Scoot, Tom, scoot!" shrieked Jack.

Our hero made a dive for the gun, which had fallen on the floor.

But Boggs, groaning considerably, did not seem inclined to get up.

Jack, too, scooted for the door, following in the wake of agile Tom.

"Gr-r-r-r!" came the growling chorus of the tied-up bulldogs.

"For the woods, Tom!" panted Jack, and both boys hoofed it as if for dear life.

"There! Now we can stop for breath, I reckon," panted our hero, as they got in under the trees. "But, gracious! That was a close squeak!"

"Where'll we go now, I want to know?" Tom demanded, between panting gasps for breath.

"That's so," Jack uttered, in new dismay. "Where can we go?"

"Gregg'll send the constables after us, anyway."

"And folks'll take his word that we were robbing him. It looks like jail, Tom, poor old fellow!"

"We're outlaws," said Eustis, solemnly.

"That's just it!" cried Jack, suddenly almost happy. "We're outlaws, rovers, fugitives! We'll have to keep out of the way, and we'll get a heap of fun out of doing it."

"Huh!" Tom uttered, disgustedly. "I'd rather not be an outlaw, thank you."

"Oh, take your choice!" Jack mocked.

"But w-w-what can we do?"

"Hide, and plenty quick, too. If we're seen, we'll be nabbed and locked up."

"And it'll be the same to-morrow," Tom muttered, dolefully.

"Then we'll have to stay hidden to-morrow."

"And what'll we eat?" quivered Eustis, who could never get far from his stomach.

"Why, we can run down to the store and lay in a stock. I've got the store key. Hang it, no! We can't go to the store, either. It's right in the village, and we'd be seen and pinched."

"Good-by to three squares, then!" came the dismal sigh.

"Why, Tom, after all, I think I can fix that."

"How?"

"Mr. Crothers's house is out of the village. No one would look there for us. We'll go over there and try to wake Dot up."

"How?"

"We might toss pebbles up and in through her window."

"She'll be scared, and holler for help."

"Dot scared?" Jack retorted, scornfully. "Don't you dare say that again. She ain't that kind of a girl."

"Well, we'll try, then," Tom assented, as Jack moved off. "I'm beginning to feel hungry already."

Jack snorted, and led the way in silence.

They were soon out of the woods, and moving rapidly along the narrow road on which the Crothers house stood.

It was a little cottage, well away from neighbors.

At this late hour all the lights were out, the family sound asleep.

"That's Dot's window, I'm sure," whispered Barry, pointing, as they halted at the edge of the little lawn. "But I'm beginning to be shaky, now. I don't know just how Dot'll take this sort of freshness. She's a girl with plenty of spunk when she gets it up."

"We'll be hungry in the morning, if we don't get some grub," nudged Tom.

"Yes; and we'll need Dot in the morning, too," Jack admitted. "Well, here goes to see how she'll stand for it."

Leaving Tom at the edge of the lawn, our hero stole forward, gathering up a few pebbles as he moved.

Under her window, he cautiously tossed one of the little missiles in through her window on the floor above.

Whack! What a noise the thing made as it landed on the floor in the stillness of the late night!

Plunk! That second one made a much lighter sound, as if it had fallen on the girl's bed.

Chug! That, again, went on the floor.

There was the sound of a low exclamation, and then of some one moving above.

Jack, with his heart in his mouth, waited until he saw Dot's shapely little head appear at the window.

"Who's that?" she called, in a tone hardly above a whisper.

"Jack!"

"Jack who?"

"Barry."

"What on earth——"

"Dot, I'm in trouble!"

"Stomach ache?"

"Don't tease, Dot. Can you come down?"

"You're not fooling me, Jack Barry?"

"Not a bit. It's real trouble, Dot!"

"Wait a minute."

Then, as our hero crouched there, close to the wall, he heard her moving about the room.

After that all was still, for a few moments, until the front door of the cottage opened softly.

Footsteps, and then Dot trod softly around the corner of the house.

"Jack, what does this mean?" she whispered.

"Will you come over under the tree? Tom's there."

Dot nodded, then, walked at Jack's side, a very serious look on her sweet young face.

Eustis awaited them eagerly, though he looked a trifle shamefaced.

"Now, what's wrong, boys?" demanded Dot, as she halted under the trees.

"Well, I reckon the constables want us," Jack answered, his color rising.

"What for?" she shot out, point-blank.

"They'll call it burglary, I suppose."

Dot gave a queer little catch at her breath, then demanded:

"Oh, Jack, that wasn't really what you wanted those chisels for?"

"No," Barry replied, truthfully enough.

"But we used 'em, just the same, to-night," Tom put in, eagerly.

Dot again looked startled, until Jack jumped into the breach.

"Tom, you shut up! Dot, I guess I'd better tell you the whole thing, from the beginning. You're a girl that knows how to keep a secret."

"Thank you; I think I am," Dot smiled, pleased at this compliment.

Then Jack plunged into the telling of the whole story.

Standing there in the dark shadow under the trees, Dot Crothers listened for at least fifteen minutes.

Then Jack had it all told.

"I'm glad it wasn't anything sneaky, boys," she said, gravely.

"But we're in big trouble, just the same," breathed Jack.

"You can go away for a while."

"But then how will I ever find out anything more about this whole tangle, Dot?"

"That's true."

"You know our cave, Dot?"

She nodded, eagerly.

Often had she peered into the cave, when in company of the two boys.

This cave was a little, close affair, that ran a short distance into the face of a low cliff over in the woods.

Its entrance, in summer, was hidden by a clump of bushes that grew there.

This cave was a "secret" with these three young people. Many the romance they had spun about it!

"I've been thinking, Dot," our hero went on. "You could come to us in the morning. Go out with that big tin case that you gather flowers into when you're after botany specimens. Then folks won't think anything about

it if they see you go prowling through the woods. You can come to the cave and tell us the news. And then maybe I can think of something else you can do for us. Will you do it, Dot?"

"Of course I will," she replied, simply and directly. "Oh, boys, you can't realize how glad I am that you haven't really been up to something wrong!"

Jack pressed her hand in silence, then remembered and asked:

"Dot, can you smuggle us out a little food in that tin flower can?"

"Nothing surer, Jack!"

"Then, good night, Dot, and thank you ever so much. We mustn't keep you out here longer. It don't look right."

"Who's to see us?" laughed Dot.

But she turned and made her way noiselessly back to the cottage.

Jack and Tom watched until she had gone inside, and had waved her hand from her window.

"Now for the cave!" breathed Jack, after a last look after the trim, slim little figure that had vanished from the window.

"She's a brick!" glowed Tom.

"Of course she is!" Jack cried, proudly. "She's a real girl."

It was not needful to go back into the village in order to reach the stretch of woods in which their cave lay.

Ten minutes later Jack paused before thick bushes that grew at the foot of the low cliff.

He held back the boughs while Tom crawled through.

Then Barry followed into the dark, rather damp little hole.

No need of a bed was there. In former times the boys had strewn the floor of this cave with leaves.

"This is comfort, after all," yawned Tom Eustis, as he stretched himself out flat on the bed of leaves.

"It's safety, anyway," Jack returned.

"But I hope Dot don't forget the grub in the morning," quivered Eustis.

"Don't you worry about Dot slipping up on anything that belongs to her to do," warned Jack.

G-r-r-r! Tom was snoring!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DIRT A RIVAL CAN DO.

Plumb, clean tired out, Jack Barry slept on his bed of leaves until the church bells woke him up that Sunday morning.

G-r-r-r! Tom was still asleep, snoring rather hard.

"Quit that racket!" ordered Barry, giving his chum a hard poke.

Tom rolled over slightly and quit snoring, though he did not awake.

As for Jack, sleep was banished for the rest of that day.

He lay there, in the heart of the woods, in that unknown little cave, thinking, thinking, thinking!

Not of his own peril was he thinking, either, but of that badly tangled skein in which his own mother's history must form one of the threads.

"I'll know all about it before I'm through," he throbbed. "But what my mother could have had to do with old Zach Gregg beats me. Did she even know him? Yet—Jupiter! She was killed in a railroad accident close to this town! Could she have been on her way here to see Gregg about anything?"

The thought stirred up the boy like an electric shock.

He fairly squirmed with the puzzle of it all.

Yet, to save him, he could not think it out.

It had not been such hard work to solve the cipher.

But to guess this greater riddle—that was a task!

"And Boggs, who holds the key—he's bought over by the enemy. Not a word out of Boggs!" growled the boy.

"Whistle, my lad, and I'll come to you!"

trilled a young voice close by.

It was Dot's voice, singing softly as she stepped her way through between the bushes.

Jack did whistle—just a soft, low little measure that he and Dot both knew.

Then she appeared, suddenly, before the bushes.

Dot certainly looked wonderfully nice in her pretty, white, Sunday dress.

"All right in there?" she hailed, pausing beside the bushes.

"All right!" Jack smiled, as he parted the bushes and looked out.

"How's your appetite?" she laughed, as she opened the lid to the big tin specimen can that she carried with her.

"Appetite famous," nodded the boy.

Dot passed in sandwiches, a can of baked beans and a can-opener.

"This'll have to last you until evening," she whispered.

"I didn't dare rob the pantry of more, or it would be missed."

"This is a feast!" glowed Barry, gratefully. "But what's the news, Dot?"

"Bad! Tough!"

"Gregg has made a charge against us, then?"

Dot nodded, looking down.

"But you don't believe it, Dot?"

"Of course I don't—Jack," she retorted, raising her eyes and looking full at him.

"Then I don't care a hang what any one else thinks!" cried the boy. "Yes, I do, though, of course—poor, dear old Deacon Spencer and his wife! What do they say?"

"I haven't seen Mrs. Spencer, Jack. But the deacon is all broken up."

"Does he believe that we're thieves?"

"He says he can't and won't believe it."

"Good old deacon!" throbbed the boy. "But what do other folks say?"

"Some believe you're bad boys, and others don't."

"But mostly, I suppose, Dot, folks do believe we tried to rob old Gregg? Eh?"

"Well, at least half the folks in town are against you. But that isn't the worst of it," Dot added, tears again coming to her eyes.

"What's wrong then, Dot? Don't be afraid to tell me. I can stand anything as long as you're not against me."

"It isn't so much what folks say——"

"Then—what?"

"Mr. Gregg has got every one looking for you."

"How has he done that?"

"By offering a reward."

"Reward?"

"He has offered one thousand dollars for either of you, dead or alive!" choked the girl.

"Whew! Lordy, he does intend to get us, doesn't he?"

"He's the meanest old scoundrel that ever lived," Dot half sobbed.

"No matter, girly! We'll get even with him. I won't rest until I do."

"I wish I could do something to help!" Dot cried, full of vimful energy.

Her eyes flashed with an eager light.

"Why, I'm not sure that you can't help, Dot."

"How, Jack?"

"You've got that botany can with you."

"Yes, yes!"

"And Gregg doesn't know that you and I are—chums?"

"No-o, I suppose not."

"And every one in the town, Dot, is used to seeing you off gathering specimens of plants. Why can't you go over to Gregg's place and ask him for permission to gather specimens on his grounds? He couldn't very well object."

"What's the rest of the plan, Jack?" Dot eagerly demanded.

"Why, if old Gregg is scared, he'll likely send for some of his accomplices to-day, if he has any. Just nose around in his grounds, Dot, as if looking for specimens. But keep your eyes open to see who visits him. Then come here later and tell me."

"And is that all, Jack?"

"That's all I can think of, Dot."

"Then I'll do it!"

"Good little Dot! But before you go——"

"Well?"

"Do you think you could reach your face half way in between the bushes?"

"Why?"

But as she thrust her face, obediently, forward Jack Barry caught her by the shoulders and promptly kissed her.

Dot flushed and flustered. She was not used to such liberties.

"That'll do!" Dot said, hurriedly.

"It'll have to, if you're going to be hard-hearted," sighed Jack.

"Hard-hearted? When you're in trouble?"

Dot thrust her flushed face in again between the leaves, and Jack snatched another kiss.

Then, turning, with a very red face, she scurried away.

"A thousand dollars for either of us—dead or alive?" throbbed the boy. "Lordy, this is mighty close to being like war between old Gregg and us two youngsters. But I'm forgetting Tom's stomach!"

He awoke his chum and displayed the food.

Tom fell to in splendid earnest. In fact, both boys ate eagerly, and, as they did so, Jack, in whispers, told the news.

They finished every morsel of the food, and every thread of the scanty but startling news.

Then, through the day, they lay there and watched.

At times they saw men or boys pass through the woods, though always at a little distance.

"Looking for us!" Tom whispered.

"And for the blood-money!" gurgled Jack.

Some of the searchers had dogs—fortunately no blood-hounds.

"This old cave is a mighty safe place!" Jack Barry thrilled.

"Don't crow too soon," warned Eustis, ominously.

Yet the day passed without detection.

The shadows were lengthening in the woods when they heard Dot's voice again.

She was coming toward their hiding place, talking, apparently, with some one.

Jacked waited in curiosity, but without a thought of fear.

Dorothy Crothers would be the last one on earth mean enough to betray them for a reward.

The footsteps came nearer.

Both boys craned eagerly forward, holding their breath by an effort.

Then Dot came into sight, forty feet away, a man walking at her side.

For a moment both Jack and Tom had a good look at the man's face.

Then he and Dot passed on.

Yet, just as the pair were going out of sight, they heard the man say, in a hearty, deep bass voice:

"Botany, my dear young lady, must be a very pleasant pursuit for the summer."

In an instant, Jack and Tom jumped as if they had been shot.

Then each boy stared at the other, with almost unbelieving eyes.

"You heard him?" gasped Jack.

"Did I?" quivered Tom.

"You recognize that voice?"

"Don't I?"

"The man we thought old Gregg murdered!" pulsed Jack Barry.

"The same fellow! I'd know that voice anywhere!"

Jack started to scramble out of the cave.

"I've got to follow——"

Then, as swiftly, our hero drew himself noiselessly back into his concealment.

More footsteps were sounding close at hand.

A man tramped by, perhaps fifty feet away. He carried a shotgun, and both boys knew him—Williams, a constable in the village.

"After the blood-money!" Jack thrilled, disgustedly. "And I can't get out on the trail of that man Dot's with! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Yet Jack fidgetted and waited, hoping that the constable would hurry along on his way.

Williams, much to the contrary, appeared to have taken a sudden liking to the spot. He halted and stood looking all around him.

But at last he started forward again, when he had unknowingly but utterly hindered our hero from going on the trail of that other man.

More minutes passed, and then Dot was swiftly before them.

"That man——" Jack began, in a breathless whisper.

"He called at Gregg's," Dot nodded.

"That's the very fellow we thought Gregg had killed."

"He was at Gregg's a little while ago," Dot hurried on. "When he was leaving he asked me for directions. I told him I'd show him the way. That was so I could take him by here. I thought a sight of him would be oceans better than just a description of him."

"Dot, that man is the key to the whole puzzle!" vibrated Barry.

"Oh, dear, I wish I'd known it!"

"Dot, do you know who he is, where he lives, or where he went?"

"He went to the railroad depot, and had to run to get his train," Dot replied, remorsefully. "Oh, dear, why didn't I guess how important a man he was."

"No matter, Dot. You'll know him if you see him again."

"And stupid me! I went home first, instead of coming straight back! But I thought you'd be hungry, and so——"

Dot opened her specimen can, and began passing in food.

"I'll have to be here again in the morning," she went on, bravely. "I don't dare take too much at a time, or I'll get caught. Worst of all, that might lead to your being caught."

"All I'm worried about, Dot, is your being caught here," cried Jack, in alarm.

"Oh, don't mind that," laughed the girl. "That would be easily explained. You could just let any one suppose I had just found you here by accident."

"You must hurry home now, anyway, Dot. It'll soon be plumb dark in these woods."

"Yes, I'll go now. Good night, boys—and you'll see me in the morning!"

Dot scurried away, while the boys fell to eating.

They were still at it, five minutes later, when other steps sounded—stealthy steps at that.

Then, suddenly, the muzzles of two shotguns were thrust in through the leaves, while a harsh voice commanded:

"Get out of that, you young scalawags! You're caught all right. Come out, I tell you!"

"Dead or alive—and perhaps old Gregg would sooner pay for us dead!" throbbed Jack.

"Coming out before we shoot?" challenged a voice.

"Yes," Jack answered, dully.

He crawled out, followed by Tom.

In the dusk the two young fugitives stared at the hard faces of their captors—two constables.

And there, grinning and smirking behind them, was Matt Boler, red-headed, freckled and mean to the core.

Matt had the impudence to fancy himself in love with Dot.

He hated our hero with all the hatred of an unlucky lover for a successful rival.

Now, in a flash, Jack Barry understood.

Matt Boler, in some way, had suspected that Dot would know where the boys were.

He had trailed her, in his jealousy, had learned the secret, and now he had brought down the officers of the law upon his rival!

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLOT TO KILL!

"Lord, you boys don't look worth the money!" grinned Constable Haley, as he backed off a little way, still keeping these "desperadoes" covered with his shotgun.

"You didn't earn the money," snapped Jack. "You took us alive."

"Oho! You've heard about the reward, have you?"

At this eager question from the constable, Jack became at once silent.

He dreaded to say anything that could possibly lead to mixing Dot up in this business.

"How did you hear about the reward?" demanded the other officer, Constable Williams.

"Didn't you just give me a hint of it?" Jack demanded.

"That wasn't enough for you to know that you was to be taken dead or alive. This thing will have to be looked into."

"Look into it all you want!" Jack retorted, sullenly.

"Some one has been giving you a tip."

"All right," smiled Jack. "Some one has been giving you a tip, too."

With that our hero turned and glowered at Matt Boler.

"Oh, you needn't mind me!" sneered Matt. "I'm doing well and feeling well, thank you. I get a third of the thousand dollars."

"You'd sell out your own father and mother for less than that!" flared Barry.

"Now, we won't have any hard words," hinted Haley, good-naturedly. "We'll just attend to business. You boys,

being valuable to us, we'll take you along in a business-like way."

With that he produced a pair of handcuffs.

Jack flushed with the shame of it all; Tom groaned.

"You don't have to do—that," protested our hero.

"Opinions differ," returned the constable. "Watch 'em, Williams, while I rig 'em out."

There was no use in resisting. These officers craved the reward and meant to have it. They would shoot either youngster who dared to bolt.

Click! click! Jack felt as if turning to ice as the steel rings snapped tight about his wrists.

Then Tom was served in the same fashion.

"Now we're pretty sure of you," announced Haley. March! You know the right direction."

Matt Boler, ashamed in spite of himself, slunk well behind the constables as the little party turned into the nearest village street.

People were just coming out for their Sunday summer evening strolls.

Anything like the sight of prisoners under armed guard is always enough to collect a crowd in a small town.

Scores of men, women and children turned and followed the party that was heading for the lock-up.

"That's Jack Barry and Tom Eustis. They've turned burglars."

"Always thought those boys would come to a bad end!"

"They'll always be regular jail-birds after this."

"Tom's father is a worthless hulk, anyway. Like father, like son."

"And nobody knows anything about Barry's father and mother. Pretty queer people, most likely."

These comments and others were made without any particular effort to keep them from reaching the ears of the boys.

Both flushed and paled alternately.

"If anything would make a criminal of me, it would be the itch to get loose and hit some of these mean wretches over the head."

But the small boys were worse than their elders.

"Stop thief!"

"How does it feel to get pinched?"

"You get great grub at the jail!"

"Jack Barry's a burglar!"

"Tom Eustis is a thief!"

Nowhere on the streets did Jack catch sight of Dot, or any member of her family.

For this much, at least, he was thankful.

Nor were good old Deacon Spencer or his wife in the throng.

Burning hot, Jack heaved a sigh of relief when he found himself at the door of the village lock-up.

"Thief!"

"Burglar!"

"Got pinched!"

"Oh my! Ain't they stuck up about it?"

The volley of jeers and taunts from some of the small

boys in the rabble dinned in their ears as the young prisoners were led inside.

They stopped in the office a moment, for "booking." This done with, the youngsters were led out into the cell-room.

"Room 3, boys," grinned Constable Haley, as he thrust them into a cell.

There he took the handcuffs from their wrists.

"Ring for anything you want," grinned the officer, as he slipped outside and locked the iron-barred door.

Then they were alone, yet not alone, for they could hear, further down the corridor, the restless steps of the officers who had arrested them, and who were determined not to let such valuable prisoners get away.

"Tom, old fellow," whispered Jack, his lips trembling, "I've got you into this fearful scrape."

"Forget it!" retorted Tom, doggedly. "I'd rather be in a scrape with you, Jack, than in clover with some people I know."

Barry gripped his chum's hand hard.

"There'll be a way out of this, if there's justice in heaven," Jack choked.

"No matter," grunted Eustis. "We won't worry. I believe dad got in jail once. It won't do me any harm, I guess."

Putting his lips close to his chum's ear, Jack whispered: "Old Zach Gregg has a pretty good idea of how far we're on his trail, or he never'd have gone to this length."

"Then he won't stop short at much of anything," Tom retorted. "He won't let matters drop at this point."

There were visitors now at the cell door. Deacon Spencer and his aged wife stood out there in the corridor.

"Jack," faltered the good old man, "I can't believe that you've done any serious wrong. I don't believe it, and I won't. If it does you any good, lad, to know that your friends stick by you in your trouble, then feel as happy as you can over it. When you come up in court I'm going to see that you have a lawyer to look out for you."

"And he'll work for Tom, too, won't he, Deacon?" Jack demanded, eagerly. "It was through me that Tom got into this scrape."

"The lawyer'll work for Tom, too," the deacon promised. "I can't believe that either of you are bad boys, though you may have got into some mischief."

"Of course they ain't bad boys," chimed in Mrs. Spencer, earnestly. "And I've brought you some supper. The officers say you can have it."

She passed two boxes of "best home cooking" in through the bars.

"And now you'll keep your spirits up, won't you, boys?" demanded the old man. "'Cause you know no harm can come to them that do right."

"And you won't forget to say your prayers, boys?" Mrs. Spencer urged. "That does a heap o' good when you're in trouble."

For some minutes more the old couple talked, and then went away.

Tom's mother, Mrs. Eustis, a hard-working, faded little woman, came next.

She was sobbing hard.

"Oh, Tom, how could you do such a thing?" she cried.

"I didn't," Tom returned, promptly.

"But you can't make any one believe that," moaned the tormented woman.

"Oh, I guess we can, mother," Tom replied, cheerily.

"Deacon Spencer has just been here to say that he'll get a good lawyer for us."

"But a lawyer can't help much, when there's them as will swear they caught you with the stolen money on you."

Tom tried to cheer his mother, though not with huge success, for she went away, weeping.

"That's harder than getting arrested," sighed Tom, trying hard to keep the tears back after his mother had gone.

They were not destined to be without visitors. Gregg and Boggs stood outside the door, scowling in at them. With them was Perkins, the head constable of the village.

"Those are the young scoundrels," Gregg declared, hotly. "Perkins, I charge you to see that they don't get away."

"We'll hold 'em all right, sir," the head constable promised.

"You must," warned Gregg, "for these young scoundrels have threatened that they'll take my life if ever they get loose."

Jack gasped in sheer amazement.

This was lying, pure and simple. Neither he nor Tom had ever even hinted at such a threat.

But Perkins chose to believe the rich man.

"Don't you be uneasy, Mr. Gregg. These young desperadoes won't never get away from this jail."

"I want you to make sure of it," continued the old man.

"Oh, I'll make sure of it, sir!"

"But I want you to make doubly sure. Perkins, this man with me, Mr. Boggs, is a wholly reliable fellow. You have authority to swear him in as a special constable, and I want you to do it."

"A special?" repeated the head constable. "What for, Mr. Gregg?"

"So he can help your regular men watch these young criminals to-night."

"I protest!" cried Jack, leaping up from his cot and leaping at the barred iron door.

"There, you see!" cried Gregg, triumphantly. "These young criminals have their plans already made to get away from here. They object to having my man put here as an extra watcher."

"Yes, we do object!" Jack cried, with tremendous vim. "We object for every reason. Mr. Perkins, Gregg wants to leave this man guarding us so that he can work some fearful deviltry. You don't know Zach Gregg's wickedness as I do. This fellow, Boggs, is his paid tool for doing the wickedest kind of dirty work. You've constables enough, Mr. Perkins. If you leave this fellow Boggs to watch us, I warn you that something will happen that will make you sorry."

"You see?" leered the old man. "They're making threats against you now, Perkins."

"We're not either," Jack shouted, defiantly. "We're telling Mr. Perkins that——"

"You needn't trouble to tell me anything," broke in the head constable, as he turned to walk away, followed by Gregg and Boggs.

"Remember, I protest!" Jack shouted after them.

Then he turned to Tom Eustis.

Dismay was written in both their faces.

"That's about the limit of old Gregg's wickedness!" Jack quivered. "Who can tell what'll happen if Boggs chances to be left alone with us late at night?"

"It's awful!" chattered Tom.

A harsh laugh at the door drew their attention there.

"Well, I'm appointed special constable," said Boggs, in a low, jeering voice.

"You scoundrel!" Jack hissed.

"Keep the change!" sneered Boggs, turning on his heel and going a few paces down the corridor.

"It won't pay for both of us to sleep at the same time to-night," Tom whispered, quiveringly, in his friend's ear.

"Oh, I won't sleep, anyway," Jack returned, dismally.

On either side of the cell was a rough bench that served also as a bed.

The two youngsters seated themselves, staring dully at each other, and then, for a change, at floor or walls.

At the further end of the room was a window at which they often looked longingly.

It was open, and beyond was the world.

But over this opening stout iron bars were fastened.

Eleven o'clock came, and the town outside was still.

Boggs walked down, from time to time, and peered jeeringly into the cell.

But the rascal was not yet alone. There were two other constables on duty with him.

"Late in the night Boggs will find some excuse to send the other fellows out for a while," Jack whispered, as he bent forward over Tom. "Then we'll find out what Gregg's real reason was for sending him here."

Clink! A very tiny pebble fell on the floor at Jack's feet.

Barry started, staring around him.

What could this mean?

Clink! Another! And through the open window, too!

"Get to the door," Jack whispered to his chum, and Tom stealthily obeyed.

Whump! A rather larger stone came in this time, but it stopped, neatly caught in Jack's hands.

There was a cord tied around this stone.

Even as Jack gazed, wonderingly, at the cord, he felt it being twitched from outside.

He gave it a twitch in turn.

Now the cord came in loosely, as Barry pulled it slowly in.

There, at the very end of the cord, fluttered a card.

"Dot's writing!" he quivered, as he held the card close to his eyes in that dim light. "Oh, the blessed girl! She wants to tell me that she's staunch, no matter what happens."

But Jack had another guess coming.

It was a very different message that greeted his eyes as he read:

"I overheard Gregg tell that man to be alone with you late to-night," ran Dot's pencilled news. "He's to kill you both, and swear that you were shot while trying to escape. Desperate! Pull the string again."

That was all.

There was no signature, but Jack Barry needed none.

Like a flash he let the string out again, waiting breathlessly until he felt another twitch.

Once more he hauled carefully in. There was a slight clinking sound, which made him draw in the cord more cautiously.

He rubbed his eyes hard as he got the further end of the cord once more within his grasp.

For, this time, there were tied to the cord three small steel picks that Dot must have got out of her father's blacksmith shop.

Hastily untying them, Jack slipped them into his pocket.

He twitched the cord once more. There was an answering tug from outside.

Feverishly, our hero pencilled on the other side of the card:

"God bless you! Now skip, quick, out of harm's way. We'll do the rest."

This he tied to the cord and threw the whole affair out.

"I hope Dot gets away mighty quick," our hero quivered. "Gracious, what chances that girl is taking to help me out of my scrape. But I'd rather be hung than have her caught at it!"

He crossed the cell on tip-toe, nudging at Tom, who stood faithfully on guard at the cell door.

Just for an instant Jack displayed the tools, and made a sign that his friend understood.

Then Barry was quickly back at the window.

He knew for just what purpose the tools had been slipped in.

The jail was old. The window-bars, set deep in brick and mortar, were secure enough unless some one had the tools for picking out the mortar.

Trusting to Eustis to pass the alarm in time, if any one came, Jack worked with the fury of fever, yet with the stealth of desperation.

That mortar proved softer than he had dared to hope—softer, undoubtedly, than the village authorities had guessed.

One bar was loose at the end of five minutes' work.

Then another, and a third.

The middle one Jack wrenched from its fastenings, yet so softly as to make no noise.

The other two bars, still fastened at the top, he pushed aside.

Now the opening was big enough. They could get through.

"Tom!"

Jack whispered the one syllable, and pointed.

Tom understood, but shook his head.

"You first, Jack!"

"Not until you're out."

"I won't go first."

"Yes, you will! Don't waste a second of our precious time, Tom! And be careful! Not a sound! Hurry, or we'll get caught. Lordy, what an excuse this would give Boggs!"

That decided Eustis.

With Jack's help he climbed up, wriggled softly through, then let himself down outside.

Just twenty seconds later Jack Barry thudded softly on the ground.

He turned to find Eustis at his side.

Just beyond, in the darkness, a white handkerchief, waving, urged them forward across the back yard of the jail.

"It's Dot—reckless girl!" came Jack's thrilling whisper, as he pushed Tom forward.

From inside came the frantic bawl in Boggs's voice:

"The prisoners are loose! Quick!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WORD THAT STAGGERED JACK BARRY.

The handkerchief lowered, but Dot stuck to her post until the softly running boys reached her.

"You dear, heedless girl!" Jack Barry choked, as he caught at her arm and forced her along with them.

"You're out, anyway!" flashed back the girl.

"And you've got to get away, Dot!"

"I'll get away all right. It's you I'm worried about."

"Leave us, Dot."

"I hate to, Jack."

"You must—now!"

"Can you——"

"Run! God bless you, Dot! Good night! Hurry!"

They had reached the corner of the stables at the opposite corner of this lot at the back of the lock-up.

Beyond was a lighted street.

Dot hurried away by a darker thoroughfare.

Now the boys, hunted, as they knew they would be, darted in through the open door of the stable.

"We may get caught in here," panted Jack, "but we can't take a bigger chance on the street."

"Oh, I don't think they'll look for us as close as this," Tom whispered back. "They'll think we're farther away."

"Who's there?" called a voice from the open doorway.

Frozen with terror, the boys crouched back in the darkness against the wall.

"Must have been the rats," they heard a man's voice mutter.

Yet the newcomer stood listening for a few moments, while the scared boys dared not breathe.

"Hullo! What's the row over at the jail?" muttered the stranger, turning to look out of the door. "Guess I might as well walk around and see."

For, by this time, many voices sounded at the lock-up.

And now, right on top of it all, came the loud clanging of the bell that announced a prisoner's escape.

"We've got to scoot for it like blazes!" trembled Jack. "Try to reach the store with me, Tom!"

Jack slid out through a side door, crouching low and listening as he ran softly.

Tom kept just at his heels.

So they turned around the corner of another building.

Ahead of them lay the lighted street.

If they could but cross that without being seen they could then reach the back of Deacon Spencer's store.

But footsteps and voices sounded.

Two of the constables were coming this way.

Swift as thought, Jack ducked into an empty rain-barrel. His signal brought Tom after him.

Down they crouched, wedged close together, the tops of their heads just below the rim of the big barrel.

"Like looking for a needle in a haystack," they heard Haley say, as that officer halted within ten feet of the barrel.

"The little rascals may be much nearer than we think," growled Williams.

"To think of letting good money get away as easy as that!" Haley groaned.

"Won't Gregg pay if we don't get the kids back?"

"Of course he won't—not a cent. It makes me crazy to think of losing so much money!"

"No use running down the street, anyway. If the kids have got far, we won't find 'em in the dark."

"Then let's search close, 'cause maybe they're not far away."

The trembling boys in the rain-barrel heard Williams and Haley turn.

Evidently the two constables were taking a close look at everything in the neighborhood.

"Dear little Dot's work for nothing!" Jack faltered, inwardly.

Yet, even had it been worth while to scramble out and trust all to a swift dash for freedom, this was impossible.

They were wedged so tightly in that barrel that some little time would be needed to get out.

"Let's go around and look in the stable!" they heard Haley propose.

"Noble idea!" Jack gritted. "Success to you!"

A moment later Jack cautiously wriggled out of the barrel, after first having peered to make sure that no one was within sight.

"Come out quick, Tom," he whispered.

Our hero stole to the street corner.

He could hear voices both up and down the street, but could see no one close at hand.

"Put for across the street—it's now or never!" thrilled hunted Jack.

Crouch! Scoot! Tom was off!

Ducking low, Jack followed.

"There goes some one!" cried a voice off in the darkness. Bang!

Tom was already safe past the end of the building oppo-

site, but Barry, who was some ten feet behind his chum, heard the sharp, hot hiss of a bullet just over his head.

Then Barry caught up with his friend.

"Around this building, and then to the store!" throbbed our hero. "Oh, quick, Tom!"

Speeding on their toes, making scarcely a sound, the hunted boys reached the rear door of Deacon Spencer's store.

Jack thrust his key in the lock, turned the bolt, drew the key out again.

They could hear footsteps and voices close at hand.

"In with you!" pulsed Jack.

He staggered in after his friend, pushed the door swiftly but softly to, and stood feeling as if he would reel and faint.

Tom, too, leaned against the closed door, which Jack did not dare lock for fear the grating of the key would betray them.

"I saw them cross the street," declared an excited voice, outside, and not more than a dozen feet away.

"You dreamed it," scoffed another voice.

"No, I didn't!"

"You shouldn't shoot wild like that. Might hit some one."

"Where can they have gone to?"

"I don't believe you saw them."

"Get a lantern and see if we can find footprints," argued one of the speakers, just before the voices passed out of hearing.

"Oh, Jupiter!" gasped Barry.

"They'll find us yet, if we stay here," trembled Tom. "Where can we run to?"

"Nowhere," retorted Jack, as he thrust the key in the lock and cautiously shot the bolt. "That infernal alarm bell has brought out half the town. We're sure to be seen and caught if we stir out. This is the safest place for a while—unless some one happens to think that I'm likely to have the key to the store. Come along, now, and be careful!"

Groping, our hero led the way to the cellar door.

Down the stairs they crept.

"Help yourself to this excelsior," Jack whispered in the dark. "Spread it out thick. It makes a bully good bed."

"You ain't going to sleep, are you?" fluttered Tom.

"No; but I'm worn out, body and soul. It'll seem mighty good to lie down for a while."

Presently both boys lay comfortably on the cellar floor.

"I don't believe this place is going to be thought of," Jack announced, bye and bye.

"But if it is——?"

"We'll likely be caught like rats in a trap. But I don't believe any one is going to think of the store. When things quiet down, though, we'll get far from here."

"Where?" Tom wanted to know.

"I've been thinking about that, old fellow. Why not go to the last place that any one would think of looking for us—over at Gregg's."

"With the bulldogs to give us away?"

"Oh, not around the house, but over in the woods where we dug up the box, for instance."

For an hour more the boys lay there, alternately listening and talking of their plans.

"I'm going to see if it's safe now," Jack proposed at last.

"Be mighty careful!"

"Won't I, though?"

Both boys stole up into the store, but it was Jack who opened the back door and went out alone.

He was back in a very few moments.

"Everything has quieted down, Tom. No one seems to be around."

"Going to make the break?"

"Right now—as soon as we've got what we need."

In that familiar old store Jack knew where everything was kept.

He pulled Tom after him, filling up the pockets of each with food that could be stowed away.

Then each provided himself with a coil of stout clothes-line.

Last of all, from under the counter, Jack drew out a pair of stout cudgels that he had been seasoning for hockey-sticks in winter.

"Now for it!" breathed Barry.

Opening the door, they stole out.

The town was, indeed, quiet again.

In safety they reached the nearest woods, then trudged through to the woods back of Gregg's place.

"Here's where we got the box," thrilled Jack, as they halted under the big elms at that still hour in the late night.

"The box that was the start of all this," sighed Tom.

"Well, we won't complain, Tom, for it don't seem possible to keep our luck down."

"Which tree?" asked Tom.

"This is the biggest, and therefore the best."

In the cellar of the store they had talked this out.

Now they climbed the tree, Jack going up first.

Thirty feet up from the ground they stopped climbing.

Here they halted, standing on two limbs that branched out from the trunk at about the same level.

And here, with the rope they had brought with them, they lashed themselves to the tree.

"Even if we drop asleep, we can't fall," chuckled Jack, growing keen as the sense of adventure dawned on him.

"The branches and the leaves will hide us, even from any one on the ground underneath. We can sleep and be safe. And we've grub enough for two or three days! This is hunkadory, Tom! Could anything be safer?"

"Not much," Tom admitted.

"Hush!"

Late as it was, voices and footsteps were coming close to them.

"It's no one on honest business," Barry thrilled, in his cautious whisper.

"Must be Gregg."

"Does that man never sleep?"

Then they stopped even whispering, for the prowlers, whoever they were, seemed headed for this same spot.

"I'll wait here," they heard Gregg's low voice say. "You go on, Boggs, and do your part. Don't fail me, for you let the boys get away, which makes it ten times more important for you to do the right thing by the young man who thinks he's coming here to meet me to-night."

"Do you want me to do just what you've told me to?" Boggs asked, in an unbelieving voice.

"Kill him—that's the programme. The young man will make trouble for me if you don't. So kill him!"

"It's a tough job!"

"But not so tough when you know that you're to get five thousand dollars for doing it."

"It's tough enough, knowing what I do," growled Boggs. "And it's a new move that you've hit upon mighty sudden."

"You're wrong there," retorted Gregg, in a low voice that barely reached the straining ears overhead. "When the young man came to see me this afternoon I saw that this thing might have to be done. That was why I made the appointment for such a late hour and got out here. Now, Boggs, you're not going to balk and fail me, are you?"

"Oh, I won't fail you! I'll do the job!"

"Hurry off, then, man! You know the clump of bushes under the red oak by the spring? He'll come by there. Hide in those bushes and wait for the young man. Don't make any mistakes and spoil my plans. Now go!"

With a growl, Boggs stole off through the night.

Catching his breath sharply, old Zach Gregg seated himself on the ground under the tree.

"Murder!" throbbed horrified Jack. "That's what it is! And the victim is to be the man I wanted to follow this afternoon—the one who walked by the cave with Dot—the one we thought was killed a week ago!"

Tom was gripping Barry's arm. The two boys stared into each other's faces.

Then, into Jack's eyes came the light of a desperate purpose.

Bending over, parting the leaves without noise, he looked down through the darkness.

Yes, he was sure he could make out the location of Gregg's white straw hat.

It was almost under where Jack stood.

"I may kill him!" faltered the boy.

Then a strange light gleamed in his eyes.

"What if I do? It'll be to save a better man's life—for any man who is against Gregg must be a good man!"

Yet Jack hardly dared to breathe, or think, as he brought his cudgel forward, poisoning it carefully, as he looked to make sure that it was pointed straight at that straw hat below.

Flop! Jack let the cudgel go, then shivered.

It wasn't such an easy thing, after all, to risk taking a human life!

Whump! The cudgel had landed.

From below there came no other sound.

But our hero, looking again, could see the white straw hat lying on the ground.

"Down, like lightning, to save that other life, Tom!" the boy vibrated.

Feverishly unknottling the ropes that bound them to the tree, the youngsters shinned down to the ground.

There lay old Zach Gregg, stretched out, breathless and still.

"I hope we haven't killed him!" throbbed Jack, wretchedly, bending over the still, old man.

But there was a flutter at the pulse. Zach Gregg would live to be mean another day, even though at the present moment he knew nothing whatever of what was happening.

"Hurry, Tom!"

Like two ghosts, the boys stole off through the woods.

They traveled with even greater care as they neared the bushes under the red oak where Boggs had been ordered to hide in waiting.

Jack stole close enough to make out a part of the form of the crouching, waiting, murderous Boggs.

Then, with a shudder, he led the way on down the forest path.

Nor did they stop until nearly a quarter of a mile away from Boggs.

"Gracious! I hope the poor fellow will be sure to come this way!" quavered Barry, as they drew up, waiting.

"If he doesn't come this way he won't meet Boggs, anyway," declared practical Tom.

"Well, he's coming. Here's some one, anyway."

By a common impulse, both boys darted back into the shadow, lest the approaching one be some one searching for them.

But Jack, peering, saw a sturdy-looking man heave into sight. His face was that of the stranger who had walked with Dot Crothers that afternoon.

"I beg your pardon!" uttered Jack, in a low tone.

Our hero's face was pallid as he stepped forward.

"What's this?" cried the stranger, stepping back, his right hand reaching for his hip-pocket.

"Put your gun up, if that's what you're after," Jack smiled, grimly. "At least—you don't need it here."

"Who are you, and what are you talking about?" cried the stranger, eyeing both boys with natural curiosity.

"Sh!" Jack cautioned. "Down the path a bit a man is stationed who has been hired to kill you. He got his orders from Zach Gregg. I know that, for I heard the order given!"

"What's that you say?" hoarsely cried the stranger, drawing back. "And Zach Gregg is my father!"

"Your father!" Jack echoed, in a daze, while Tom caught at a tree-trunk for support.

"My father," nodded the stranger, steadying himself. "But you can guess what kind of a father he has been. I am Tom Gregg, at your service. But how did you know about me?"

"It's a queer, wonderful, twisted, tangled-up mess," Jack spoke, hurriedly, his voice sounding as if he were in the spell of a daze. "But I heard you speak the name of

my mother a week ago. I am Jack Barry, the son of Jennie Barry, a woman who was killed near here in a railway wreck some years ago."

It was Tom Gregg's turn to start.

"You're Jack Barry, son of Jennie Barry?" he murmured, slowly. "Then, Jack Barry, lad, I'm thinking I have news that may stagger you. The woman who was killed and buried was not Jennie Barry—that I can swear to!"

Staggered?

Jack Barry felt as if the world were turning upside down!

CHAPTER XI.

A LYNCHING FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE!

"Hold on!" moaned Jack.

Tom Gregg caught him by the arm, letting him gently down to the ground.

"That's right," nodded young Gregg. "Sit down and let me tell you what I can."

"My mother?" quivered Jack. "It can't be that she's alive!"

"I can't say anything about that," replied young Gregg, gravely. "All I know, for certain, is that the woman killed in the railway wreck and who was buried under Jennie Barry's name, was not Jennie Barry. It was a mistake in identification, as I know, for I knew Jennie Barry well. When I looked the matter up, to be sure, I found that the dead woman didn't answer at all to your mother's description."

"What was my mother to you?" Jack asked, suddenly.

"My brother Richard's wife," replied the stranger, slowly.

"That couldn't be," Jack retorted, quickly. "She was my father's wife."

"All straight enough," rejoined young Gregg, quickly. "Your mother was Jennie Crossleigh. She married my brother Richard, who, I am sorry to say, made her anything but a good husband. Your mother and my brother were in a steamboat wreck on Lake Michigan. Richard was drowned, and it was supposed that his wife went down with him. Jennie Gregg, which was her name then, reached shore. She didn't take pains to dispute the report of her death. Afterwards she married your father, Barry, who proved to be an excellent husband."

"But why did my mother never speak of her girlhood days?" Jack asked, wonderingly.

"Because she married my brother against her father's wishes. Old Crossleigh—your grandfather—drove her from his home—disowned her. Your mother, in turn, felt too bitter against her father to mention his name."

"But what can old Gregg—I beg pardon, your father——"

"Don't beg my pardon for disrespect to Zach Gregg," urged the stranger, with a bitter smile.

"What grudge can Zach Gregg have against me?" Jack asked.

"A good many years ago, Jack, lad, your grandfather, Crossleigh, relented, but he couldn't find his daughter. He died, however, leaving her all his money."

"But that don't explain," Jack protested.

"It helps," returned Tom Gregg. "At the time when your mother was supposed to be drowned in Lake Michigan she was Crossleigh's heiress. Now, the law takes it for granted that, when husband and wife are drowned together, the husband, being the stronger, lives at least a few seconds longer than the wife. That would have made my brother Richard inherit your mother's fortune, if she had drowned with him, as was supposed."

"I see," murmured Jack, like one in a dream.

"Now, as Richard also died, that would leave the money to my father and myself."

"And your father got it?"

"In after years, yes. It was years, though, before he heard of his chance and jumped at it."

"And you got some of the money?"

"No; for I had long ago stopped having anything to do with my father. But lately I heard of the queer business, and came here to see him, for I knew what he did not know at first—that your mother was not drowned with Richard Gregg."

"Then your father knows who I am, and that I might keep him from enjoying his fortune?"

"That must be the truth of it," nodded Tom Gregg.

"And the woman who was buried in this town as my mother was not my mother?"

"That I can swear to," Tom Gregg promptly answered.

"Then my mother may be alive?"

"That I can't say, Jack, lad."

"Oh, she can't be alive," Jack sighed, miserably. "If she had lived she would have come back to me."

"But my father was living in this town, enjoying the money, at the time your mother was reported killed," hinted Tom Gregg, smiling bitterly. "It's likely that Zach Gregg had the wrong identification made."

"Then what happened to the woman who was really my mother?"

"Perhaps we would have to ask Zach Gregg," responded the son.

Suddenly Jack Barry sat bolt upright, feeling as if he had received an electric shock.

He remembered the words in the cipher message that he had translated.

"Boggs can complete the clue easily, in case of need!" he repeated.

"What's that?" Tom Gregg asked, curiously.

"Oh, I haven't even time to tell you now!" vibrated Jack, leaping to his feet. "Boggs knows the answer to the riddle that's tormenting us—that's all. And Boggs, who knows all, is lurking down the path even now! Tom Gregg, are you armed?"

"Yes—a revolver and two strong arms."

"Will you—nail—Boggs—then—if we show you where he is? He can answer us, if we can make him!"

Tom Gregg straightened up on his feet, drew a revolver, and answered simply:

"Show me where he is."

Then did Jack Barry turn scout in the woods, leading the way to the untangling of the great skein that had knotted in his life.

He halted at last, with Tom Eustis behind him, while Tom Gregg, fully posted, went forward alone to the clump of bushes that had been pointed out to him.

There was a sound of quick, sharp voices, the noise of scuffling; then Tom Gregg appeared again, revolver in his right hand and his left hand gripping at the collar of the scared, captured Mr. Boggs!

"If you try a single trick, my man, I'll kill you!" warned Tom Gregg, gruffly.

Then, without warning, the captor hurled his prisoner to the ground, levelling the revolver point-blank at his head.

"Jumping beeswax!" gasped Mr. Boggs, suddenly staring as if he feared that he had gone mad.

For now he found himself being regarded by the two boys, who had moved forward out of concealment.

"You kids?" choked the scoundrel.

"Roll over on your face!" ordered Tom Gregg, sternly.

"That's it. Now put your hands up behind you, Boggs!"

"W-what are you going to do?" faltered the wretch.

"Going to kill you, if you hesitate a second about obeying orders."

Up went the hands, and the man who had taken charge of matters handed his revolver to Jack, saying:

"Kill him if he stirs, lad!"

Mr. Boggs trembled not a little as the process of tying him up went on.

The job was done at last, and Tom Gregg yanked the brute to his feet.

"Now, come into the woods with us a bit," urged Tom Gregg.

"W-what are you going to do with me?"

"Come along and find out, man!"

Boggs, like many a brutal bully, showed how utter a coward he could be when some one else had the whip-hand.

He went, sullenly, with his three captors for some distance into the woods.

"Sit down!" ordered Tom Gregg, at last, pushing the fellow. "Now, Jack, it's your turn. Explain to this fellow what's to be done with him."

"You know who I am," ripped out Jack, throwing himself on his knees before the terrified brute, and holding that revolver suggestively close.

"Y-y-yes," assented the terrified wretch.

"I'm Jack Barry, son of Jennie Barry. You know what has been done to my mother, and you know the part you've played. Now, what could you expect at my hands?"

"W-what do you mean?"

"I mean," Jack went on, his face pallid in its sternness, "that I'm going to settle Jennie Barry's account and my own in full with you. I mean that I'm judge and jury and

everything else just now. I am going to settle this whole fearful business with you right now. Boggs, this is lynch law, pure and simple! You've got to die for your villainy! You have five minutes that you can say your last prayers in, if you know how to say any. Then I'm going to kill you—pop off!—and it won't do you a ghost of any good to howl for mercy."

"Y-you're going to butcher me?" shrieked the brute.

"Butcher is just about the word, I guess," Jack retorted, with terrible calmness. "At the first shot I'm going to blow the top of your head off, and the rest of the bullets I'll scatter into your carcass. Oh, I'll make a good job of it! Now, then, begin to pray, if you're going to. Tom Eustis, take my watch and tell me when the time is up."

"B-but don't do this awful thing!" blubbered the brute. "Have some mercy!"

"Just as much mercy as you've been showing others all through your life!" clicked Jack. "I told you not to waste your time begging for mercy. Get ready for death! You can't dodge it!"

"But I can tell you things that'll make it worth your while to let me go," pleaded the wretch.

"What could you tell me now?" Jack demanded, scornfully.

"Will you let me try?"

"If you'd rather use your time in that way instead of praying."

Then Boggs began to talk, wildly and ramblingly.

Yet he told the very things that Jack Barry wanted to know.

Jack's clever questions brought out the story in full.

As it proceeded, our hero felt, indeed, as if the world had begun to stand on its head.

Yet he listened, wondered and thrilled, for now he felt convinced that the rascal was speaking the truth.

The story was done at last.

Boggs had told all that his hearers wanted to know—far more than they had expected to find out.

"That'll do, you cur!" Tom Gregg broke in, at last. "You can shut up, Boggs."

"B-but you won't kill me?" whined the wretch.

"I don't know," solemnly responded Jack Barry, who, of course, had not had an instant's notion of shooting for vengeance's sake.

"Let me go, for I've told you the truth—the whole truth," pleaded Boggs.

"We'll tie you up tighter, and gag you, anyway," broke in Tom Gregg. "Then we'll leave you stowed away in the bushes. If we find that you've lied to us, we'll come back to you—never fear!"

With that they bound and gagged the wretch more securely, dropped him in the thick brush, and left him there.

"And now for a team!" throbbed Tom Gregg. "Fortunately, I can wake a man up at this hour of the night without fear of trouble. And you boys can hide in the woods until I drive by and pick you up."

"But, first of all, I'm going back to where I left your father," Jack announced.

"What for?" Tom Gregg smiled, bitterly.

"I'm worried. I want to make sure that I didn't kill the old man with that cudgel."

"Oh!" Again that strange, bitter smile from the young man who could take no interest in the fate of a despised father. "You run down there, boys, and I'll drive by when I get the carriage. Hurry, though!"

Some minutes later Jack Barry and Tom Eustis stole cautiously up to that well-remembered spot under the elms, where Zach Gregg had buried the cipher.

Zach was not there now. He had gone, and with him had gone the white straw hat.

"He's not dead, then—not by my hand, anyway," Jack throbbed, thankfully. "Now for the road, Tom Eustis!"

Within ten minutes Tom Gregg drove by, in a surrey.

The boys climbed in upon the back seat, and Gregg drove off.

But the long night was through at last.

Summer day was breaking as they reached the edge of the town.

"Hey!" bellowed a man after them. "Hold up, there! You're running off with two boys that the police want! Stop, there! It's against the law!"

Both Jack and Eustis ducked from the expected shot.

But none came. Instead, the man who had hailed ran to the nearest telephone to send the news along the road.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"Hold up, there! Stop! The law wants you!"

A man, with a police badge in plain sight on his coat, stood in the middle of the road.

It was four miles beyond Belmont.

Tom Gregg had been driving rapidly, and the horse now showed the effects of the pace.

"You're my prisoners!" sang out the constable, who blocked the road.

"All right," hailed Tom Gregg, reining in the horse. "Turn the muzzle of that gun away, though. You may hit us."

He had brought the horse almost down to a walk as he neared the constable, who obligingly lowered the muzzle of his weapon.

Crack! It was a rousing blow of the whip that landed on the horse's back just as the officer reached for the bridle.

Away bounded the horse at a gallop, leaving the constable to the rear.

Bang! There was a business-like sound to that shot. Whizz-zz!

"Ouch!" blurted Tom Eustis, bending forward.

"He hit you—the rascal!" quivered Jack, eyeing the

splash of red that showed at the top of Eustis's nearer shoulder.

"No matter—it ain't much!"

Tom Gregg, still urging the horse at its best gallop along the road, turned into a narrower, rougher road.

"We've got to keep off the main road," he explained, reining in and turning around. "Word has gone by telephone, and we've simply got to dodge shotguns, revolvers, and every old thing if we expect to finish our drive."

"We must finish it—if we live through it!" gasped Jack. "Eustis is hit already."

"If we meet any more officers, I don't know what we shall do," grimaced Tom Gregg. "I shall make a guess at all the back roads on the way."

The stop was made at last on a lonely looking road, before a rustic gate. On the grounds beyond nothing but thickly planted trees showed. The house that they sought was hidden behind the trees.

"Now, you'll wait here," proposed Tom Gregg. "I'll go up alone and talk to that doctor-crook who runs this asylum."

Then followed the most tortured half hour that had ever come into Jack Barry's life.

"Here they come!" quivered Tom Eustis, at last.

Jack turned, saw, thrilled. Then he leaped from the carriage, darting into the grounds.

On Tom Gregg's arm leaned a woman who seemed unable to support her own weight, so helplessly was she tottering.

Yet, when she caught sight of Jack darting toward her, she straightened up, drew herself free of Gregg's arm and came speeding toward our hero.

She caught the boy by the shoulders, then swayed as she peered, feverishly, into his face.

"Jack! Jack, my darling boy, is it really you?"

Jack knew his mother. He could not have been deceived. That well-remembered face had changed somewhat with the years, but he still knew her!

Boggs had told them most of what had happened.

In that railroad wreck, years before, Jennie Barry had been all but killed.

Close to her was another woman who had been killed outright.

Zach Gregg, coming upon them, had recognized the woman who stood between him and his wealth.

It had been a simple matter for him to change the handbags belonging to the two women.

In Mrs. Barry's satchel, found later in the grasp of that other dead woman, were papers and letters that confused the coroner and led him to certify to the death of Jennie Barry.

The real Jennie Barry had been found with a severe injury to her skull.

She was delirious at first, and afterwards demented.

Zach Gregg had seen to it that she was removed to the private asylum of a Dr. Craven, a physician without principle, eager to sell himself to any good bidder.

In this asylum, Jennie Barry had been confined through

the years that followed, and Boggs had been her principal keeper.

Both Dr. Craven and Boggs had been well paid for their trouble by money-loving old Zach Gregg.

During the last two years Jennie Barry had fully recovered her sanity, though without thanks to any care from Dr. Craven.

She had demanded to be set free, but had been ruthlessly kept a prisoner, at the command of Zach Gregg.

She had demanded news of her son, only to be told that he was dead.

But now all was forgotten. She was happy with Jack. The past counted for nothing in her new happiness.

"Well, I suppose we'd better start back," announced Tom Gregg, gathering up the reins. "And dodge constables all the way, too."

"Why, Dr. Craven can't set constables upon us," protested Mrs. Barry. "He was frightened enough to release me at once when you demanded it."

"The constables belong to another story, mother," Jack laughed. "But we won't let it bother us. The constables will let us alone when we spread all this wonderful story."

"You've got the skein unraveled at last, Jack," grinned Tom Eustis, who felt as proud and happy, now, as if he had done it all himself.

"All but one little twisted thread," laughed Jack. "What does that 'fourth from floor in attic' mean that we read about in the cipher?"

"We'll find out," promised Tom Gregg. "If we can't make my father tell, we'll hunt for ourselves."

Mrs. Barry looked from one to the other, in a puzzled way.

"More mystery that I can't understand," she sighed.

"Oh, wait a little, mother!" Jack begged. "We'll explain it all bye and bye, when we're a little more used to having each other again."

Tom Gregg kept to back roads so well as to dodge constables until just before they reached Belmont.

Here Haley suddenly bobbed up from behind a stone wall.

"I guess I want you boys—want you bad!" he grinned.

"Walk alongside of us, then, into the town," invited undismayed Jack. "We won't try to get away, this time, I promise you."

"If you do you won't get far," warned the officer, as he walked beside the surrey.

Into the village they drove.

There, standing at the jail door, they espied Zach Gregg. Almost immediately the old man turned, catching sight of the occupants of the surrey.

He saw his own son, saw Mrs. Barry, saw her son, the latter grinning derisively.

The old man started, paled, choked and swallowed hard.

Then, all in a twinkling, Zach Gregg clutched at his throat, next sank to the sidewalk.

It was apoplexy. The old man, taken to his home, died within two hours.

"Are you going with your father?" whispered Jack, as

the unconscious old man was lifted into a wagon at the store.

"I shall go up to the house bye and bye," Tom Gregg answered. "But, sorry as I am to have to say it, lad, my duty to you is greater than to my own father, and that on account of his own conduct. I must see you through your affair with the constable."

Haley had been standing by, silent but watchful.

"I'm ready for you, officer," Jack announced.

"Then we'll go to the justice's office," replied Haley.

He led the way. Justice Simpson was in, ready for business.

"Where's the warrant?" asked the justice.

"Er—er—there isn't any," was Haley's disconcerted answer. "You see, judge, it was a felony charge, and a warrant wasn't needed."

"Where's the complainant, then?"

"Dying, I guess."

"No warrant, and no complainant!" snapped the justice, crustily. "A pretty case, this!"

Then Tom Gregg broke in with a few well-chosen words.

"No case at all," said the justice, shortly. "The prisoners are discharged. Boys, I'm not sure but you have a good case against the constable for damages for false arrest."

"I shan't push it," laughed Jack. "I know too well myself what it feels like to be in trouble."

"And I won't see any part of that two thousand dollars reward, either," sighed Haley.

"My father couldn't pay you if he lived," said Tom Gregg, shortly. "Every cent that he has belongs to Mrs. Barry."

Jack Barry now took his mother direct to Deacon Spencer's house.

They were sitting on the porch talking.

"Who is that young lady who is looking this way?" asked Mrs. Barry, presently. "She seems greatly interested in us."

"Mother," cried Jack, suddenly, as he wheeled and looked, "here is Dot Crothers, the greatest girl that ever lived—the truest and the swe—"

But Jack did not finish. He was bounding down the path to meet Dot, who had stopped close to the gate.

"Oh, Jack, I heard in the village how the case against you had fallen flat through Zach Gregg's death," Dot rattled on, breathlessly. "And I heard about a strange lady—"

"Dot, dear girl, the most wonderful of things—my mother isn't dead! That's my mother on the porch. Come right along, please. You two have simply got to know each other, and like each other."

Later, in that happy, busy day, Jack found time for a short run over to the Gregg house.

Tom Gregg and Tom Eustis had gone out into the woods and had liberated Boggs. Neither that rascal nor Dr. Craven were punished; they fled as promptly.

But they had other news to tell.

"Jack," glowed Eustis, "that 'fourth from floor in attic' is all solved. And mighty lucky for you that it is!"

"It was simple enough, after all," smiled Tom Gregg. "That chimney in the store-room in the attic is a dummy chimney. I dug out the fourth brick up from the floor, on the side toward the stairs, and there I found a box of papers that will enable your mother, Jack, to step right into this rather handsome fortune."

"But why should your father have written that information in cipher?" Jack asked, greatly puzzled.

"For my information, probably, or the information of some one after his death," Tom Gregg replied, thoughtfully. "For one thing, I knew that cipher of his. My father had used it for years. The other night, after that quarrel which you overheard, in which my father threatened my life, he undoubtedly went out and buried the cipher so that I should never find it and thwart his plans. Though I did not know where your mother was, I had begun to suspect that she was alive. I visited my father and advised—urged—him to do justice to her."

Deacon Spencer and his wife, retired from active cares, are living now with Jack and his mother in the handsome new home that Mrs. Barry bought in Belmont.

Tom Gregg is living with them, too, and nothing strange about it.

In youth he had been an ardent wooer of Jack's mother, only to see his brother win her.

But now Tom Gregg has won his sweetheart.

So has Jack, for that matter, for he was wedded to Dot Crothers barely two months ago.

The honeymoon is hardly over.

As for Tom—well, Tom is trying in earnest to amount to more than any other member of his family ever did.

Tom, too, lives with Jack and the latter's mother.

With Jack's help, Tom is fitting out for college.

THE END.

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